

**LAODICEA: ABUNDANCE AND POVERTY  
EXEGESIS AND TRANSLATION OF REVELATION 3:14-22  
FOR USE IN TODAY'S ENGLISH AND SPANISH-SPEAKING  
CONGREGATIONS**

A Professional Project  
  
presented to  
  
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Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment  
  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
  
Gary Roger Curtis

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Gary Roger Curtis

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**GARY ROGER CURTIS**

has been presented to and accepted by the  
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**Faculty Committee**

Gregory J. Riley, Chairperson  
Cornish R. Rogers

**Dean of the Faculty**

John R. Fitzmier

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Due to extenuating circumstances, final edits were not completed for this project.

## ABSTRACT

Laodicea: Abundance and Poverty

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The Book of Revelation is a fascinating document but one that perplexes many, and repels not a few. It is an established and venerable part of the New Testament canon throughout virtually all of Christendom, but many Christians and Christian leaders neglect it. Some Christians search it for hidden references and predictions concerning the current events of the day, while others decry it as irrelevant and deficiently Christian.

In this study, a brief review of the history of the use of Revelation from its first recipients up to the present time is followed by a discussion of the book as representative of the apocalyptic genre, though it is distinct and unique. The Book of Revelation is found to be prophetic, apocalyptic literature, an authentically Christian work that differs from Jewish apocalypses in several significant ways. This study shows also that the Book of Revelation is written in a genuinely epistolary form, reflecting its essential contextualization among first-century Christian groups in Asia Minor. As a prophetic work intended for specific Christian communities in the Roman Empire in the first century, its application must be adapted to contemporary situations without neglecting the understanding of the document in its original setting.

The bulk of this study is a detailed analysis of the message to Laodicea, Revelation 3:14 to 3:22. Analysis of concrete references to the geographic, cultural, social, and

religious situation of Laodicea at that time helps to show both the particularity and general applicability of its message.

Detailed analysis of the Greek text, with several references for use in Spanish-speaking settings, along with original translations of the pericope in both English and Spanish complete the study.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The Book of Revelation presents today's Bible readers with a number of challenges. It is a part of the canon which tends to tantalize and bewilder. Some keepers of the flocks urge their charges to avoid it like forbidden fruit. These leaders seem to fear that if their people taste it, they will become confused and may go over the edge. So most mainliners have sidelined the book and have never read it with understanding or any real depth. Nonetheless, other earnest souls, ignoring the admonitions of their long-robed leaders, have decided to taste the forbidden fruit, and have then strayed off into unfamiliar territory without maps or tour guides and have gotten lost in a land of anxious, endless speculation concerning the rapture, the beast, 666, the end of the ages, antichrists, lying wonders, and other assorted apocalyptic arcana.

The purpose of this project is to help to rescue the Book of Revelation from this abuse and disuse so that people today can learn to find and be enriched by the treasures of inspiration and spiritual insight which the book offers. I shall point out abiding values in the book applicable to people of faith today, while at the same time clearly showing the book to be a product of a very

different time and situation, whose primary purpose was to offer answers for people at that time and not to provide a timetable for people now or at the end of history. It has images which can still inspire.

As an example of abuse of apocalyptic themes, one could cite an earnest Biblical expounder who summed up his 166-page study by asserting that “we [Christians] will never know the day or hour until it happens, but astronomically we can narrow it [the return of Christ] down to a two day period.”<sup>1</sup> He asserted that very probably the return of Christ would occur in September of the year 2000. Another apocalypticist dubbed the September 13, 1993 UN peace accord between the PLO and Israel as the “covenant with death,” which began the “Seventieth Week” of Daniel. He predicted that famine, pestilence, disease, and earthquakes would be affecting “1/4 of the earth’s population...before April of 1997.” At that time U.N. forces “spearheaded by the United States” would take over the Temple Mount area in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Another, from Spain, writing in Spanish, considers former President Ronald Wilson Reagan as the Antichrist, and predicts that he and his armies will be destroyed on June 27, 2010, the same date on which he predicts Jesus Christ will

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<sup>1</sup>Michael John Rood, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” Skypager 1-800-759-8888 PIN # 1603853, 1996, 166.

<sup>2</sup>William R. Villanueva, Signs of the End of the Age: Revelation Unravelled (Ramseur, N. C.: Solid Rock Publishing, 1996), 123-126. ✓

return to establish his Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Predictions and warnings are spewing forth in books, television and talk shows, and sensationalist newspapers in an unstanched hemorrhaging of apocalyptic rhetoric.

Meanwhile, in contrast to this obsessive preoccupation, a great many Christians go about their business blithely unaware even of the basic rudiments of the contents of Revelation. In spite of continuing popular interest in the notion of the imminent advent of some kind of apocalyptic catastrophe, it still seems true that many mainline ministers avoid the last book of the Bible like a plague. More than a few leaders and professors say they wish it were not even in the canon. Some deprecate its full canonicity by assigning it a kind of Johnny-come-lately, second class citizen status, and others compare it unfavorably to other works and say it should be replaced.

In a comment on the Book of Revelation in the Christian Century Martin Marty wrote, "Notice that the Book of Revelation is at the end of the Bible. It barely made it into the scriptures."<sup>4</sup> In Adventures of Ideas, Alfred North Whitehead wrote:

The last book in the Bible illustrates the barbaric elements which have been retained to the undoing of

<sup>3</sup> Francisco March, Profecía del final de los tiempos (Palma de Mallorca, Spain: c/o Estudio General, 1-Ático, April 25, 2002), 8, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Marty, "A Revelation," Christian Century, 114, no. 16 (14 May, 1997): 495.

Christian intuition. In itself and apart from its bearing on religious sentiment, it is one of the finest examples of imaginative literature as it stands translated in King James's Bible. Also, as an historical document, whether its origin be Christian or Jewish, it is of priceless value for the understanding of strains of thought prevalent when the Christian religion was in process of formation. Finally, the book only states, more pointedly and more vividly, ideas spread throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, even in the Gospels themselves. Yet it is shocking to think that this book has been retained for the formation of religious sentiment, while the speech of Pericles, descriptive of the Athenian ideal of civilization, has remained neglected in this connection. What I am advocating can be symbolized by this shift in the final book of the authoritative collection of religious literature, namely, the replacement of the book of the Revelation of St. John the Divine by the imaginative account given by Thucydides of the Speech of Pericles to the Athenians.<sup>5</sup>

Charles H. Talbert, in The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John wrote, "[the] Greek Orthodox lectionary omits Revelation altogether. Catholic and Protestant lectionaries have only minimal readings from the Apocalypse."<sup>6</sup> The Calendar and Workbook for Church Leaders: 2002, out of more than two hundred recommended Scripture lectionary passages, lists passages from Revelation only twice: for All Saints Day (Rev. 7.9-17), and January

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas (New York: Free Press, 1961), 170-71.

<sup>6</sup> Charles H. Talbert, The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 2.

1 (Revelation 21.1-6a)--neither of them a Sunday.<sup>7</sup>

### BRIEF HISTORY

As is implied by Martin Marty's comment quoted above that Revelation "barely made it into the scriptures," distaste for the book arose long ago among those who considered themselves followers of Christ. Among its first detractors were no doubt some from the unrepentant groups and individuals whom John of Patmos denounced in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 in his messages to the seven churches, probably especially their leaders. Surely the so-called "apostles" (Rev. 2:2) censured by John would not have tended to agree with his writing's authoritative status. Nor would "Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess" (Rev. 2:20.) Neither would the group called "Nicolaitans" (2:6,15) have been inclined to think his words divinely inspired. Besides these and their followers, perhaps many others would have faltered and doubted under the lash of John's words. Of the city-churches addressed as a whole in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, perhaps especially the Christians in Sardis (3:1-6) and Laodicea (3:14-22), who received stern censure with little or no praise, may have considered themselves deeply offended and would have been tempted to doubt the divine

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<sup>7</sup> Calendar and Workbook for Church Leaders, 2002 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 3-6.

authenticity of John's words.

Besides these very earliest detractors and rejecters--among the original recipients, those who were most directly affected by the document--there were many others who arose in antiquity to question the validity of the Book of Revelation. Among the first of these may have been Marcion (ca. 85-160), who rejected most of the rest of the New Testament as well. If he ever saw a copy of Revelation, and we have no direct evidence whether he did or did not, insofar as he considered it at all, he would surely have scorned it as too redolent of the Old Testament and of what he regarded to be the inferior creator-deity of the Jews.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Alogi (or Alogoi), a second-century group, "refused to use Revelation on the basis that it contained errors in fact and had not been written by an

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<sup>8</sup> E. C. Blackman, Marcion and His Influence (London: SPCK, 1948), 22-23; Adolf von Harnack, Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God, trans. John E. Seely and Lyle D. Bierma (Durham, N. C.: Labyrinth Press, 1990), 57-63; Tertullian, Adversus Marcionem, trans. and ed. Ernest Evans, 2 vols., Oxford Early Christian Texts, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 2:270. Talbert cites Tertullian (Against Marcion 4.5, 3.14) in support of the idea that Marcion rejected Revelation. In Adversus Marcionem 4.5 Tertullian says, "Apocalypsin eius Marcion respuit," i.e., "Marcion disallows his [the apostle John's, according to Tertullian's understanding] Apocalypse." To what degree this statement might reflect Tertullian's actual knowledge that Marcion had seen and rejected a copy of the Book of Revelation is not known, but it may be an inference Tertullian made based on Marcion's rejection of the Gospel of John.

apostle,”<sup>9</sup> and because “they believed its view of the afterlife was too worldly.”<sup>10</sup> Another ancient opponent, Gaius, opposed it, not only for regarding it as of non-apostolic origin, but also as having been written by a notorious heretic. “Gaius, an influential presbyter of the Roman church, wrote (ca. 210) a manifesto declaring that Revelation had been written by the gnostic heretic Cerinthus.”<sup>11</sup> There were Alexandrian Christians who “wanted to oppose the use of Revelation in the churches, on the basis that its literal interpretation, especially of the ‘millennium,’ was a distortion of the spiritual nature of Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> When Eusebius (ca. 265-339) “classified the Christian literature purported to be Scripture into ‘accepted,’ ‘rejected,’ and ‘disputed,’ Revelation was still classified as ‘disputed.’ Churchman Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) was even more negative, omitting it from the list of canonical books and forbidding its use publicly or privately.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> M. Eugene Boring, Revelation. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Talbert, 1, citing Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.11.9, and Epiphanius, Medicine Chest 51.3. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Boring, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



## MISAPPROPRIATIONS

Perhaps it is unnecessary to talk at length regarding abuse of the Book of Revelation and the apocalyptic genre. Surely it is all too easy to mock the “The End Is Near!” school. Yet, in spite of the track record, open to all who care to take the trouble to consult the history, the same mistakes are repeated over and over again. Those who are ignorant or unheedful of the history of failed prediction and mistaken identification step forward to repeat the same folly over and over. They set dates and seasons and assign the blackest of hats to those whom they deem the evil ones. Time passes, the rapture has not occurred, no definitive Antichrist has appeared, and no one has yet been cast into a lake of everlasting fire. To be fair, though, one must grant that the biblical record itself seems ambiguous at places.

Although Jesus, as portrayed in Acts 1: 6-7, answers a question concerning whether he would at that time [*chronos*, in Greek] “restore the kingdom to Israel” by saying, “it is not for you to know the times or periods,”<sup>14</sup> in Mark 9:1 he is quoted as saying that “there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power,” and in

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<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the New Revised Standard Version is the version quoted in this study. In Chapter 3 of this paper, I present my own translation of the verses exegeted there, Rev. 3:14-22.

Mark 13:30 and Matthew 24:34 (Luke 21:32 omits the word *tauta*, “these”), that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” 2 Peter 3:8 declares, “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4: 15, talks of “we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord.” As Calvin Roetzel has observed, Paul’s “conviction that he lived in the last generation of humankind was unshakable.”<sup>15</sup> Paul was joined in that belief by many other first-century Christians. Depending on what part of the Bible one emphasizes and how directly one applies it to oneself, one can easily draw very different conclusions concerning the imminence of the return of the Lord.

The apocalyptic idea of the *Naherwartung*, or imminent nearness of the awaited change of the ages, was evidently already affecting New Testament writers and some of the people they were writing about. Apocalypticism was a prominent feature of much early Christianity, and the Book of Revelation, after it was written, was often called upon in support of apocalyptic ideas. Tertullian (160-c. 225), for example, announced sightings of “the heavenly Jerusalem [cf. Rev. 3:12; 21:2, 10] suspended in the sky.” According to Arthur Wainwright, citing Tertullian’s *Adversus Marcionem*

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*, 3rd. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 54.

3.24.4, the vision, seen by pagan Roman soldiers on a mission to the East, “came early each morning for forty days. Sometimes it faded gradually; sometimes it vanished instantly; but day after day it reappeared.”<sup>16</sup>

Another example of overly explicit identification of passages of Revelation with events in history far removed from the book’s original context is that of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202) and his successors, who “treated the Apocalypse as a detailed map of the course of history.” According to Wainwright, commentators following in the wake of Joachim’s work “argued that the book prophesied events from the time of Jesus until their own day, whether that day was in the thirteenth, fourteenth, or any other century. The need to revise the accounts given by their predecessors did not discourage them. Their ingenuity succeeded in bringing the predictions up to date.”<sup>17</sup> And this kind of ingenuity is still active today.

#### IMPORTANCE

In spite of this unsavory history of abuse, treasures of great beauty and power in the Book of Revelation are waiting to be discovered. I have seen that its wealth of vivid imagery and its

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<sup>16</sup>Arthur W. Wainwright, Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 53.

spiritual depth and intensity offer resources that people can learn to call on not only in extraordinary crises, but also in the trials and pressures of everyday life. Without falling into the snares of fundamentalist literalism, and without supposing that it is completely congenial in all ways with the Gospels and the Epistles, we can still appropriate the riches of Revelation to motivate, inspire, and comfort.

### THESIS

The thesis of this project is that, once the Book of Revelation is recognized as a particular example of the apocalyptic genre, it can be understood. It is essential that it be anchored firmly in its own first-century cultural milieu and religious setting. When that is done, it can provide a rich source of spiritual encouragement and inspiration for the informed reader. Informed readers can apply it *mutatis mutandis* in their own lives. They can intelligently and effectively tap its spiritual resources for their own times and their own situation. This project can help anyone working with the Book of Revelation, but especially those working with English-speaking or Spanish-speaking congregations, since exegesis of the key section selected is oriented to those groups--to the languages in which they carry out their Bible study, to Bible versions they use, and to Bible

commentators whose works are widely used in their communities.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

### APOCALYPSE

The literary term “apocalypse” is a designation used to describe a genre of writings primarily of Jewish and Christian provenance that flourished from somewhat before the first century B.C.E. (perhaps even as early as the third century B.C.E.) until somewhat after the first century C.E. This study enters in some detail into the nature of this literary genre and demonstrates that Revelation, though unquestionably unique, is still marked by many features typical of the apocalyptic genre. Norman Gottwald has characterized the genre as follows: “the apocalyptic genre is a type of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation about end-time judgment and salvation and/or about the heavenly realms is given to a human being by an otherworldly messenger.”<sup>18</sup>

J. J. Collins, in Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre, (1979) articulated the following definition:

“Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal,

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<sup>18</sup>Norman Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 584.

insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>19</sup>

Both of these definitions will inform this study in a general sense, while other special features of Revelation will also be pointed out and analyzed.

#### SALVATION

The underlying theologoumenon, DEUS SALUS, “God (is) salvation” in Latin, is a basic theological principle of this study. It undergirds this study of soteriology in Revelation as exemplified in Rev. 3:14-22. The following affirmation is an expression of this conviction:

Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the LORD GOD [Hebrew: YAH YAHVEH], is my  
strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation. (Isa. 12:2)

As one of the clearest, most explicit, and most nearly verbatim statements in the Bible of DEUS SALUS, this passage expresses the theological basis, presupposition, and point of departure of this

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<sup>19</sup>J. J. Collins, “Introduction: Toward the Morphology of a Genre,” in Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre, ed. John J. Collins, (Missoula, Mont.: [Society of Biblical Literature] distributed by Scholars Press, 1979), 9.

writer's approach to the Bible, theology, and spirituality, and thus of this study of soteriology in Revelation as expressed in the messages to the seven churches, especially in the message to Laodicea.

PREVIOUS WORK ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION: KINDS OF  
APPROACHES

In 1972, in A Commentary on the Revelation of John, George Eldon Ladd identifies four distinct methods of interpretation of Revelation, which are picked up later, with some variations, by others, such as M. Eugene Boring (1989) and Samuel Pagán (1993, 1999).<sup>20</sup> In the order in which Ladd presents them, the methods are: (1) the “preterist,” a scholarly-critical approach which views the Book of Revelation as an expression of hopes, fears, and aspirations firmly rooted in their own particular first-century soil; (2) the “historical,” which sees Revelation as a symbolic history of the church from the time of John down to the end of time; (3) the “idealist,” which views the book as a symbolic portrayal of eternal spiritual verities rather than as prophecy or sociological symptom;

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<sup>20</sup>George Eldon Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); Boring, Revelation; Samuel Pagán, Apocalipsis: Visión y misión (Miami: Caribe, 1993), 36-40; Samuel Pagán, El Tiempo está cerca: Una Lectura pastoral del Apocalipsis (Miami/Nashville: Caribe /Thomas Nelson, 1999).

and (4) the “futurist,” which sees Revelation as a prediction primarily of the ultimate end-time scenario and not of the history of the church from John’s time on.

Boring, in Revelation, states that the preterist “is the method followed by practically all critical Bible scholars of all theological persuasions today.” However, he mentions Jacques Ellul, Paul Minear, and William Stingfellow as contemporary practitioners of the “non-historical” method, his term for the idealist school. An ancient practitioner of allegorical and idealist methodology with relation to the Book of Revelation was Origen (c. 185-254).

Though there is some scholarly difference of opinion with regard to the extent to which Victorinus of Pettau (d. circa 300) reflects the historical method, Boring mentions him as the author of the oldest extant commentary on the Book of Revelation and as a representative of the “church-historical,” i.e., historical method. “Victorinus of Pettau (ca. 300), understood himself to be living in the time of the sixth seal just before the End.”<sup>21</sup> Boring also

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<sup>21</sup> Boring, 48, citing Wilhelm Bousset, Die Offenbarung Johannes (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), 53. (Wainwright, though, emphasizes that Victorinus “made use of the principle of recapitulation, according to which later sections of the book predict the same events as early chapters have done,” and that Victorinus’ commentary “bears little trace of the kind of interpretation practiced many centuries afterward by writers who treated the book as a chart of the course of history.” Wainwright, 29.)



points out that some Reformation commentators saw the papacy as “the beast,” while on the other hand some exponents of the Counter-Reformation identified Martin Luther with the same. Boring mentions Scofield, Darby, “media ‘evangelists,’” and Dallas Theological Seminary as representatives of the “end-historical,” or futurist persuasion. Ladd distinguished between “moderate” and “extreme” futurist approaches. “Extreme” is Ladd’s characterization of the “end-historical” “dispensationalism” of futurists like those cited above from Boring. The “moderate” futurism that Ladd describes joins with the dispensationalists in seeing the primary purpose of Revelation as a description of the end times, but does not see the letters in chapters 2 and 3 as descriptions of the history of the Christian church nor does it limit chapters 4 to 18 to a description of the post-rapture plight of believing Jews, as the dispensationalists tend to do.

I enter this study with several important presuppositions. I work from a sure sense of the error and lack of foundation of those contemporary dispensationalists who make specific, predictive identifications between Revelation and contemporary figures and events, and I am certain of the basic soundness of the literary-critical method as an analytic tool, yet confident that at least some parts of Revelation do communicate abiding spiritual

truth, if we can learn how to see and receive it. The purpose of this project is to equip Christians and anyone else so inclined to apply Revelation's truths with wisdom and power in our contemporary world.

### INTEGRATION AND DELIMITATION

In this study I draw on insights which I have gained through participation in seminars on Revelation taught and led in person by Samuel Pagán, president of Río Piedras Theological Seminary in Puerto Rico, by Eugene Boring, and by William Herzog. I benefit also from my own experience in teaching and preaching on themes of the Apocalypse and in leading a video seminar that is enriched by various kinds of educational materials prepared by Bruce Metzger and religious educator Donn C. Downall and his staff. Furthermore, I build on invaluable suggestions made by Professor Cornish Rogers in a semester course on preaching values in the Book of Revelation. My longterm goal is to develop a course that will offer accurate information, useful suggestions, and inspiring, empowering, and consoling truth.

Though my intention is to demonstrate clearly the folly of predictive-specific approaches to the book and to show the explanatory power of a historical-critical approach, it is also to show how powerful and indestructible hope can arise from the kind

of faith and commitment and prophetic critique that Revelation exemplifies and calls for.

This study does not, of course, attempt anything even remotely approaching the thorough, detailed, magisterial commentaries on the Book of Revelation by R. H. Charles and David E. Aune.<sup>22</sup> Instead, for the most part, with the exception of the exegesis of 3:14-22, I make general, introductory remarks along the lines of short works designed for use by the general church-going public, works such as those of Bruce Metzger's Breaking the Code, Justo González' Tres meses en la escuela de Patmos, Catherine Gunsalus González' and Justo González' Revelation, Richard L. Jeske's Revelation for Today, including two studies by Samuel Pagán Apocalipsis: Visión y misión and El Tiempo está cerca: Una Lectura pastoral del Apocalipsis,<sup>23</sup> plus others. Sometimes in this study

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<sup>22</sup> R. H. Charles, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary, vol. 44 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920); and David E. Aune, Revelation 1-5, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 55A (Dallas: Word Books, 1997.)

<sup>23</sup> Bruce Metzger, Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); Justo L. González, Tres meses en la escuela de Patmos: Estudios sobre el Apocalipsis (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997); Catherine Gunsalus González and Justo L. González, Revelation, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Richard L. Jeske, Revelation for Today: Images of Hope (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Samuel Pagán, Apocalipsis; Samuel Pagán, El Tiempo está cerca.

more technical detail is included, directed at those responsible for instructing others, particularly in English and Spanish, highlighting especially images and evocations of hope and salvation in relation to central concepts of apocalyptic eschatology. A translation in both Spanish and English and a detailed exegesis of Revelation 3:14-22 is provided in Chapter 4.

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1 describes the problems of use and disuse mentioned earlier. Historical and contemporary misuse and neglect of the book are described; various examples of millenarian movements gone awry are cited. How either ignorance or misunderstanding of apocalyptic insight (and especially of the Book of Revelation), can weaken the faith, the service, and the witness of pastors, preachers, religious educators and other Christians is given serious consideration.

Chapter 2 provides a general description of the historical setting, genre, and content of the Book of Revelation. Scholarly differences are noted, but areas of consensus and my own conclusions are also expressed.

Chapter 3 is an exegesis of Revelation 3:14-22. The despair expressed in Biblical and in contemporary secular laments contrasts with the evocation of hope, trust, and confidence in

salvation found in central passages of the New Testament, such as “by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8), and “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will saved...” (Acts 16:31). A pervasive lack of trust in the ultimacy of God’s glory and power contrasts with the singing confidence of the Apostle Paul’s affirmation, “Then comes the end, when he [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power...so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:24,28b).

The Book of Revelation can be seen as an extended illustration of and exhortation to basic trust in and commitment to God’s ultimate salvation. It evokes saving faith. The basic thought is echoed in the affirmations, “Salvation belongs to our God...” and “Salvation and glory and power to our God...” (Rev. 7:10 and 19:1, respectively). The promises to the “victor” in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 can also be fruitfully seen as affirmations of God’s power of spiritual salvation in spite of circumstances either too accommodating or too adverse. The message to Laodicea is particularly relevant to those in situations in which religious persecution is not a serious, present reality.

Chapter 4 contains a summary and conclusion in which are set out theoretical and practical recommendations concerning

the use and abuse of the Book the of Revelation. A translation of Revelation 3:14-22 into English and Spanish is provided. Areas in which broad agreement concerning use of Revelation can and should be reached is emphasized, but the study also emphasizes that the book lends itself to multiple uses corresponding to a multiplicity of diverse needs. The reality of hope and salvation, the power of images of hope as expounded and nurtured in communities of faith and embodied in works and witness, is held up. The study will indicate ways in which teaching and preaching and living principles of hope as imaged forth in Revelation can still invigorate church and society. Surely, living strongly in faith and hope is very possible without one ever reading a line of the Book of Revelation, but at least some, if not all, of its vivid and powerful images, appropriately understood and applied, are of unique and irreplaceable value. We would be the poorer without them.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Book of Revelation and the Apocalyptic Genre

The apocalyptic genre is named after the Book of Revelation. The first word in Greek of the book, and thus, according to ancient usage, the first word of the title of the work as well, is *apokalupsis*. Nonetheless, there are scholars who have felt it necessary to qualify the classification of the Book of Revelation within the genre of apocalypse, as defined previously. Some scholars wish to qualify the book as partaking also significantly of the prophetic genre, and some wish to call particular attention to the significance of the document's overall epistolary framework.

A leading scholar on the apocalyptic genre, John J. Collins, comments on two significant features of Revelation that distinguish it from other works of the apocalyptic genre: the absence of pseudonymity and the lack of *ex eventu* reviews of history. Regarding pseudonymity, Collins writes:

Pseudonymity was a constant feature of the Jewish apocalypses. Since John is presumably the author's real name, Revelation is anomalous in this respect. [Still] In all but the matter of pseudonymity, he [John of Patmos] adheres to the apocalyptic manner of revelation-mediation by an angel, visions, even a brief suggestion

of a heavenly ascent in 4:1. The absence of pseudonymity is a very limited departure from the conventions of the apocalyptic genre and has little bearing on the conceptual structure of the work.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding its status within the apocalyptic genre, from self-characterizations found in the Book of Revelation itself, it seems appropriate to refer to it, at least in part, as prophecy. The contents of the book are referred to as prophecy in 1:3; and 22:7,10, 18-19. In 22:9, an angel says to John, "I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets...." In 10:11 heavenly representatives say to John, "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings." Duling concludes, in his revised material on Revelation in the third edition of The New Testament, "We may think of John, then, as an apocalyptic prophet."<sup>2</sup> G. B. Caird writes, "John, though he adopts the apocalyptic form, claims over and over again to be a prophet."<sup>3</sup>

Georg Strecker, in his updating of Philipp Vielhauer,

*as renumbered  
the text notes  
at the end of  
the notes.*

1 <sup>\*</sup>John J. Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 270-71. It should be noted, though, that not all scholars agree. Some still regard the work as pseudonymous.

2 <sup>\*</sup>Dennis C. Duling and Norman Perrin, The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History, 3rd. ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1994), 450. (Perrin died in 1976) X

3 <sup>\*</sup>George B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine, 2nd ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1984), 10.



writes that “the union of prophecy and Apocalyptic...finds expression most impressively in the author of the Apocalypse of John.” He states further, “John the ‘seer’ (Rev. 22:8)...composed his work with prophetic self-consciousness; but he is essentially an apocalypticist.”<sup>4</sup> Boring says apocalyptic “was basically the child of prophecy (Hanson), ‘prophecy in a new idiom’ (Rowley).”<sup>5</sup> On the first page of the introduction to his study on Revelation, Boring characterizes the document as “a pastoral letter to Christians in Asia in the late first century who were confronted with a critical religiopolitical situation, from a Christian prophet who wrote in apocalyptic language and imagery.”<sup>6</sup>

Another important difference in emphasis between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres which appears to be illustrated in Revelation is the otherworldliness of apocalyptic. The properly prophetic material of the Jewish prophetic writings has a clear this-

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<sup>4</sup> Philipp Vielhauer and Georg Strecker, “Apocalypses and Related Subjects,” in New Testament Apocrypha, rev. ed., vol. 2, Writings Relating to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. ed. R. McL. Wilson, (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 567.

<sup>5</sup> Paul D. Hanson, The Dawn of Apocalyptic (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); and Harold H. Rowley, The Relevance of Apocalyptic, rev. ed. (New York: Association Press, 1963), as cited in Boring, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Boring, 1.

world emphasis, while the apocalyptic genre brings in a decidedly otherworldly emphasis. The Book of Revelation reflects this otherworldliness. Concerning this general difference between apocalyptic eschatology and prophecy, J. J. Collins wrote the following:

For the prophets the most significant action takes place on earth. Even if a decision is taken in the divine council, it is acted out on earth, in 'plain history.' For the apocalypticists however, the most significant action takes place between heavenly mythological beings, in the conflict of God and Belial, Christ and Anti-Christ, angels and demons, sons of light and sons of darkness.<sup>7</sup>

Collins goes on to write:

[when] the most significant action is situated among the heavenly beings then the main hope of human beings is to be elevated to this higher sphere of life...In classical biblical prophecy the issue had always been the life of the nation. Apocalyptic still deals with a communal context...[but] its concern has extended to the life of the individual. By its focus on heavenly, supernatural realities it provides a possibility that the human life can transcend death, not merely by the future generations of the nation but by passing to the higher, heavenly sphere. It is this hope for the transcendence of death which is the distinctive character of apocalyptic over against prophecy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>John J. Collins, "Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death," in Visionaries and Their Apocalypses, ed. Paul D. Hanson, Issues in Religion and Theology, 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 68.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

The absence of *ex eventu* reviews of history (referred to by many other writers as *vaticinia ex eventu*, that is, prophecies after-the-fact)<sup>9</sup> and pseudonymity are related to a fundamental difference between the Book of Revelation, a Christian apocalypse, and the Jewish apocalypses. In the Bible, one of the clearest examples of *vaticinia ex eventu* or *ex eventu* history reviews, at least for the critical scholar, is the pre-Christian Book of Daniel. Writing in the time of the Maccabees sometime in the 160s B.C.E. (chapters 1-6 were probably composed in the third century B.C.E., and they may incorporate older material<sup>10</sup>), the book's writer does a review of history for the period of about 400 years leading up to his own time. He presents this historical review as though it were a *vaticinium*, i.e., a prophecy, or a series of *vaticinia*, prophecies, made by a figure of the past, Daniel. The Book of Revelation does not use these literary devices of pseudonymity and *vaticinia ex eventu*, and its authority is not based on anything other than the writer's own status as a Christian prophet.

Collins writes:

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<sup>9</sup> "*Vaticinium ex eventu* (pl.: *vaticinia*) is a Latin phrase meaning 'a prophecy from an outcome.'" Richard N. Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 207.

<sup>10</sup> John J. Collins, Daniel, First Maccabees, Second Maccabees: With an Excursus on the Apocalyptic Genre. Old Testament Message, vol. 16. (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1981), 3-4.

One of the purposes of historical reviews was to enable the readers to see where they stood in the course of predetermined events...In Revelation, however, as in all the early Christian writings, a crucial act of deliverance has already taken place with the death and resurrection of Jesus. For this reason, Revelation shows no interest in history prior to Jesus....The conviction that the eschatological age has begun gave rise in early Christianity to a new outpouring of prophecy and lent new authority to prophetic utterances. For that reason, John did not need to enhance his authority by presenting his work as the revelation of Enoch or Baruch [two examples of pseudonyms used by writers of Jewish apocalyptic], but could claim his authority in his own name.<sup>11</sup>

Duling makes a similar observation. “For Revelation, authority does not come from a famous ancestor who is believed to have accurately predicted the present, but from Jesus Christ, whose martyrdom inaugurated the last days and provided the basis for understanding potential martyrdom in the present.”<sup>12</sup>

The Book of Revelation reflects a blending of the apocalyptic genre with that of prophecy (in an overall epistolary framework). David Aune attributes this blend to a redactional process in which the final editor adapts the whole from the standpoint of a prophet. “Though the distinction between

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<sup>11</sup> Collins, “Apocalyptic Eschatology,” 271.

<sup>12</sup> Duling and Perrin, 449.

'prophecy' and 'apocalyptic' is admittedly a modern one, there are legitimate distinctions that can be made between the two, and in the final edition of Revelation the author consciously plays the role of an early Christian prophet."<sup>13</sup> Whether or not one accepts this redactional view, the interweaving of prophecy and apocalyptic in an epistolary framework is evident in the Book of Revelation.

Accordingly, the Book of Revelation may indeed be prophecy, but it is not precisely "classical biblical prophecy." Not only in style and imagery, but also in its content, insofar as it calls for a hope in transcendent, otherworldly salvation, it is then more similar to other works of the apocalyptic genre. In his Theology of the New Testament, Bultmann writes that the hope of the apocalyptic literature "awaits salvation not from a miraculous change in historical (i.e., political and social) conditions, but from a cosmic catastrophe which will do away with all conditions of the present world as it is...the salvation of the faithful will consist not in national prosperity and splendor, but in the glory of paradise."<sup>14</sup> Rowley makes the general distinction between the prophets and the

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<sup>13</sup> David E. Aune, "Introduction," Revelation 1-5, cxxv.

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribners and Sons, 1951-1955), vol. 1:4. (1)

apocalyptists that, “Speaking generally, the prophets foretold the future that should arise out of the present, while the apocalyptists foretold the future that should break into the present....The apocalyptists had little faith in the present to beget the future.... They saw not wicked men heading for disaster so much as innocent men suffering direst agonies for their faith, the righteous Remnant in the crucible of affliction, and they looked for a great divine intervention in history in the immediate future.”<sup>15</sup>

Revelation is a work of apocalyptic prophecy that concentrates not on secular, nationalistic Jewish aspirations so much as on the transcendent heavenly hope of small fellowships of followers of Christ in Asia Minor in the first century C. E. John’s message is “to the seven churches of [the province of] Asia” (Rev. 1:4, 11; 2:1-3:22), and it is to their situations in the context of their expectations that he addresses himself in the light of his transcendent cosmological vision. John saw the hope of the small bands of Christians in Asia Minor to lie not with reforming or overthrowing the society and culture in the midst of which they lived, but rather with everlasting life in the heavenly New Jerusalem, the “holy city.” This was to be a city that would come down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:2, 10) as part of a “new heaven and new earth” (Rev. 21:1).

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<sup>15</sup> Rowley, Relevance of Apocalyptic, 38-39.

The challenge to the Christians was to remain faithful: to avoid succumbing to the overwhelming power of the Rome-dominated culture, to avoid idolatry in all its forms, to eschew any accommodation to Jewish and pagan religionists, to resist the blandishments of those in their own ranks who did not maintain a hard line of non-accommodation, and to sustain their own testimony, even in the face of potential martyrdom, to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:2, 9; 20:4). “His message was harsh and demanding.” His reader-hearers (1:3) “were to avoid compromise...no matter what the cost.”<sup>16</sup> John believed that he was divinely commissioned to interpret both the threatening and the seductive aspects of the situation of his coreligionists and to make clear the hard choices that lay before them, so that they could perceive and properly understand their challenge and stand firm. In the introductory section of Revelation, in Rev. 1:9, John said he wrote to them as a “brother,” and as one who shared fully with them (as a *sugkoinonos*) in the pressures of their situation and in the challenges to their commitment to endurance (*hupomonē*).

Boring has written that John chose “the letter form not so much in imitation of Paul as for the same reason as Paul: He has

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<sup>16</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Book of Revelation,” The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity, vol. 1 of The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 412.

something important to say which he cannot say personally to the congregations because he is absent.”<sup>17</sup> John is separated from the churches, isolated on Patmos (1:9), quite probably banished there against his will.<sup>18</sup> John himself is experiencing persecution for his convictions, and he expects to be upheld by God in his ordeal and to be rewarded eternally for his steadfastness. He holds out promises of eschatological reward to all the overcomers (participial forms of *nikao*) in their shared struggle with the surrounding culture. The overcomers must refuse all compromise with paganism and anything “involved in giving the emperor divine honors, even if such resistance resulted in death (cf. 15:2 with 20:4 and 7:14).”<sup>19</sup>

John of Patmos, not entirely unlike Jesus of Nazareth, at least in some of his sayings (see, among many other references, Bultmann, Primitive Christianity<sup>20</sup>), saw a conflict between the kingdom of God and the world. “Do men really want God’s Reign? Or is it the world they want?”<sup>21</sup> Many years ago Schweitzer wrote,

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<sup>17</sup> Boring, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 81-82; Aune, 81-82.

<sup>19</sup> Yarbro Collins, 401.

<sup>20</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, Primitive Christianity: In Its Contemporary Setting, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: New American Library, 1974), 90-91.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 90.



“for the institutions of society, the rule is: affirmation of the world, in conscious opposition to the view of Jesus....”<sup>22</sup> Schweitzer characterized Jesus' view as “world-negation,” or “rejection of the world,”<sup>23</sup> “*Weltverneinung*,” in the German original.<sup>24</sup>

Whether or not one chooses to find and emphasize apocalypticism in Jesus of Nazareth, certainly John of Patmos in Revelation wrote a prophetic, apocalyptic letter so that those who had “an ear” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9) could separate themselves from “the dwellers of the earth” (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8) and claim their place in the heavenly kingdom.

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<sup>22</sup> Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 402.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Albert Schweitzer, Von Reimarus zu Wrede (Tübingen: Mohr, 1906), 400.

## CHAPTER 3

### Exegesis of Revelation 3:14-22

Rev. 3:14: και τω αγγελω της εν Λαοδικεια εκκλησιασ  
γραψον ταδε λεγει ο αμην, ο μαρτυς ο πιστος  
και αληθινος, η αρχη της κτισεως του θεου

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea, write:  
thus says the amen, the faithful and true witness,  
the beginning of the creation of God.

Like all the seven messages in chapters 2 and 3, this concluding one of the seven starts off with an address to its immediately intended recipient, which in each message is the “angel” of a local congregation (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). In this case the immediately intended recipient is the angel of the *ekklesia* of Laodicea. The message to the angel of the Laodicean congregation, like the other six, includes also, at or near the end: “let the one who has an ear hear what the spirit is saying to the churches” (ο εχων ους ακουσατω τι το πνευμα λεγει ταις εκκλησιαις), the exact same ten Greek words in each message. Accordingly, each of the seven messages is intended particularly for that local congregation named in the introductory verse of its section (through its “angel,” probably its “guardian angel,” to be explained shortly), and also to all those in the various churches who have the

spiritual ability to receive the message as it may apply to their situation or as they may in any way benefit spiritually from it.

Though diverse interpretations have been offered, “angel” probably refers to the church of Laodicea’s angelic representative in the heavenly realm.<sup>1</sup> Caird writes that the Jews “had long since become accustomed to the idea that each nation had its angelic representative in heaven, who presided over its fortunes and was held accountable for its misdeeds, and John is simply adapting this familiar notion to a new situation.”<sup>2</sup> In the Christophany of Rev. 1:12-20 the seven stars seen in the risen Christ’s right hand (1:16) were identified with the seven angels of the seven churches (1:20). That the stars are in Christ’s hand indicates that the churches belong to Christ and are to be governed by him and are responsible to him for the life of of the churches.<sup>3</sup> They represent the spiritual heart and energy of the churches through which the spiritual heart and energy of Christ are

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<sup>1</sup> Boring, 86-87; see also Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), s. v. “aggelòs,” ~~vol~~ 1: 86-87, by Gerhard Kittel .

<sup>2</sup> Caird, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Paul S. Minear, I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Vision of the Apocalypse (Washington, D. C.: Corpus Books, 1968), 42.

transmitted to them, and they also reflect the response or lack of response of the churches to Christ's leading. Farrer says that "the soul or will of each church is its angel."<sup>4</sup>

In reflecting on the risen Christ's revealing at the end of chapter 1 "the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven lampstands," that "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the churches" (Rev. 1:20), Farrer writes that "Praise and blame are to be awarded for the constancy and brightness (or the reverse) of the lamps' burning. . . . So if the churches are lamps, it is in the aspect of their performance--the witness offered to men, or the worship offered to God. The soul or will of each church is its angel. . . . So it is the angels that are admonished in the messages to the churches."<sup>5</sup> The churches have a double existence. Their angels are with God and Christ in heaven, but their ministry and spiritual life are carried out among humanity upon the earth. The spiritual reality of their having a home in heaven with God and a commission to live out that reality on earth puts them in conflict with those who are opposed to Christ's purposes on earth. "Though the saints have their sphere of action on earth, they are 'in Jesus' (i.9, xiv.13), they are in heaven

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<sup>4</sup> Austin Farrer, The Revelation of St. John the Divine(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

(xii.1) or tabernacle there (xii.12, xiii.6); the ‘dwellers upon earth’ are the enemies of God (vi.10; viii.13; xiii.8, 12, 14; xiv.6).”<sup>6</sup>

The command to write followed by *Tade legei* suggests a royal decree or divine utterance. The sovereign or the deity is commanding the scribe to write down or the vaticinator to utter the authoritative decree or divine pronouncement backed by all the power and majesty of the sovereign’s position or the deity’s status. *Tade legei*, “thus saith,” or “so says,” is a standard prophetic messenger formula<sup>7</sup> used over 250 times in the LXX.<sup>8</sup> Aune documents its use in Hellenistic and classical Greek literature of the oracular speech of the gods.<sup>9</sup> Aune says the Greek expression “has an antique ring, not unlike the English expression ‘thus saith.’”<sup>10</sup> The formulaic expression occurs immediately after the command to “write” in each of the seven messages to the churches. Minear says that the “conventional formula, simple and direct, would conjure up in a worshiping congregation the fear and trembling associated with standing before God and hearing his awesome words of judgment

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<sup>6</sup> Farrer, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Boring, 87-88.

<sup>8</sup> Aune, 141.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

and warning.”<sup>11</sup> Each congregation would hear the solemn, repeated utterance seven times, not just once in connection with its own specific message. Each of the seven messages is bracketed by the “thus says” and the “Let anyone who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” Each message, in addition to being specifically for the church to which it is directly addressed, is also for the learning and exhortation of all the churches. The general promise of blessing and exhortation of 1:3 to those who hear and heed the apocalyptic prophecy would be brought to bear on each congregation with accumulating weight and gravity: “Blessed be the reader and the hearers of the words of this prophecy, and those who keep what is written in it--for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3).

Following the “Thus says” of each of the seven messages is what Boring calls a “christological ascription,” or “christological affirmation.”<sup>12</sup> Aune calls them “Christological predications.”<sup>13</sup> Immediately after the “Thus says” in each of the seven messages, there follows a brief “recitation of the qualities of Christ, drawn for the most part from the description in the first chapter.”<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Minear, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Boring, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Aune, 121.

<sup>14</sup> Caird, 27.

tripartite ascription here in Rev. 3:14 is:

ο αμην, ο μαρτυς ο πιστος και αληθινος, η αρχη της  
κτισεως του θεου.

The amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning  
of God's creation.

Aune writes that the “unusual titular use of the term  
ο αμην [*ho amen*], “Amen” (only here in the NT), is probably an  
allusion to the Hebrew text of Isa. 65:16.”<sup>15</sup> In view of the use of  
*alethinos* in the next phrase, *ho martus o pistos kai alethinos*, “the  
faithful and true and witness,” which reflects the LXX translation of  
the Hebrew *amen* in Isa. 65:16, we can conclude that *ho amen* here  
in Rev. 3:14, along with the following phrase, *ho martus o pistos kai  
alethinos*, “the faithful and true and witness,” no doubt alludes to  
the LXX Greek text of Isa. 65:16 as well as to the Hebrew. The literal  
Hebrew in Isa 65:16 is “the God [of] amen. The LXX translation has  
*ton theon ton alethinon*, “the true God.”

Caird writes that Amen “is a Hebrew word derived from a  
root meaning strength and firmness, and no doubt John uses it  
partly with reference to its etymology, to proclaim that Christ has all  
the consistency and fixity of purpose which the Laodiceans lack. But  
in the Revelation Amen is frequently used as a liturgical response, a  
strong affirmative answer to the declarations of God. Christ. . .in his

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<sup>15</sup> Aune, 255

earthly life and above all in his character as the **faithful and true witness**, was the Amen to God's purpose."<sup>16</sup> Indeed *amen* is used a total of nine times in Revelation, but only here as a nominative title of Christ. The use of the word as a title of Christ emphasizing his status as a resounding "amen" to all of God's creative activity seems quite appropriate in view of the emphasis in Revelation on God as the Creator and on Christ's close association with God (chapter 4, and *passim*).

In Revelation 1:5, Jesus Christ is listed along with God and "the seven spirits which are before His throne" as one of the senders--through John-- of the Book of Revelation "to the seven churches that are in Asia." There in 1:5 Jesus is already given the title, "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the sovereign [*ho archon*] of the kings of the earth." Thus, we see that Christ's title here in Rev. 3:14 reflects not only Isa. 65, but also chapter 1 of Revelation. Indeed, all the christological predications in the seven messages to the churches share the feature of referring back in some way, in least in part, to descriptions already given of Christ in chapter 1.

The category of "witness" and "witnessing," or "testimony," is central in Revelation. In the second verse of the very first chapter of Revelation, John makes his initial description of his

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<sup>16</sup> Caird, 57.



own activity in writing the Revelation by declaring that he “bore witness to the word of God, and to the witness [or witnessing, *marturia*] of Jesus Christ.” The very first thing he says about Jesus Christ, in 1:5, is that he is “the faithful witness.” As John begins his initial description of his visionary experience and of its setting, he says that he was “on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the witnessing [*marturia*] of Jesus” (1:9). At a highly climactic moment--in chapter 19, after the thunderous proclamation of the victory of God over Babylon, and after John is commanded to write, “blessed are they who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb”--the angel says to John, “I am your fellow servant and of your brethren who have the testimony [*marturia*] of Jesus. Worship god, for the testimony [*marturia*] of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (19:10). In what immediately follows, John sees “heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and he who is sitting upon it is called faithful and true” (19:11). In the next-to-last verse of Revelation, the exalted Jesus is referred to as “he who witnesses [*martureo*] to these things” (22:20).

The term *arche* is used three times in Revelation-- here, and in 21:6 and 22:13. In 21:6, God Himself says “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning [*arche*] and the end.” In 22:13 the exalted Jesus applies these titles to himself: “I am the Alpha and the

Omega, the first and the last, the beginning [*arche*] and the end.”

The complete phrase here in Rev. 3:14, “the beginning [*arche*] of the creation of God,” is particularly interesting for several reasons.

One is that in Isaiah 65:16, right after repeating the phrase “the God of Amen,” the verse continues: “because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my sight.” Then verse 17 reads, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” Then verse 18: “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” And finally, verse 19: “I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.”

Christ as the “beginning of creation” in Rev. 3:14 reflects the new creation of Isaiah 65, and is a prelude to the concluding chapters of Revelation, chapters 21 and 22, where not only is the title *arche* used again, in reference to Christ and to God, but where John has a vision of the new creation. John sees “a new heaven and a new earth,” and “the new Jerusalem,” where “God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. . .mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away,” and where God, “the one who was seated on the throne” says,

“See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:1-5).

Another reason why the phrase, “the beginning [*arche*] of the creation of God,” is so interesting is that similar language and a similar concept are found in Colossians 1:15-18, and these linguistic and conceptual affinities may reflect first century cultural and religious links between the neighboring cities of Laodicea and Colosse. In Colossians 1:15 Christ is referred to as “the firstborn of all creation.” In Col. 1:18 he is referred to as the “beginning [*arche*], the firstborn from the dead.” These two phrases seem to be reflected in the phrase “the beginning [*arche*] of God’s creation” in Rev. 3:14, and Christ’s titles in 3:14 definitely allude to his titles “the firstborn of the dead and the ruler [*archon*] of the kings of the earth” in Rev. 1:5. There are other linguistic parallels that could be mentioned, but the relation between this reference in 3:14 in the message to the Laodiceans and the references in the epistle to the Colossians may be more than verbal. Hemer avers that “the strong and explicit parallel of content and context is surely more than verbal: it is called forth in reply to similar tendencies of thought persisting in the district. . . .”<sup>17</sup>

Proverbs 8:22, translating from the LXX, reads, “ the Lord created me [the] beginning [=*arche*] of his ways for his works,  
<sup>17</sup> Colin J. Hemer, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting, The Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 185.

before the Age he founded me in [the] beginning [=arche].” In commenting on this, Hemer writes, “The use of *arche* both in Col. 1.18 and and Rev. 3.14 rests upon Prov. 8.22, but in both cases we argue that the application to Christ as the preeminent ‘uncreated principle of creation’ is set against a similar tendency in the local *Sitz im Leben*.”<sup>18</sup> Colosse was only about 11 miles from Laodicea,<sup>19</sup> and the Christian community at Laodicea “was closely connected with that of Colosse and is mentioned five times in Colossians.”<sup>20</sup>

The significance of this correlation--geographically and religiously--and of the verbal parallels, has to do with the apparent Laodicean accommodation to the surrounding pagan society. As will be brought out shortly in the present study’s exposition of the message to the Laodiceans, one great spiritual problem for the Laodiceans, in John’s eyes, may have been that they were too happily integrated into the pagan society and were failing to live up to the demands of their unique situation as Christ’s church. In stressing Christ’s status as “the beginning [beginning=*arche* in Greek] of God’s creation,” John’s message to the Laodiceans may have been alluding to and endeavoring to counteract a religious syncretism among them that was detracting from Christ’s unique

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<sup>18</sup> Hemer, 185-86.

<sup>19</sup> Aune, 249.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

status as God's Conquering Son who had sat down with his father on his throne (3:21), and in whose "book of life," "from the foundation of the world," the names of God's true children have been written (Rev. 13:8, 17:8).

In Colosse, at the time of the writing of the epistle to the Colossian Christians, there was evidently, in the judgment of the writer of the epistle, a potential doctrinal threat to the Christians there arising from cosmological and philosophical speculation--and the writer considered it necessary to oppose that threat.

Colossians 2:8 and 9 reads:

See to it no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the elemental spirits of the universe [=kosmos], and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.

Concerning this doctrinal and spiritual challenge in Colosse, and its relation to Laodicea, Hemer writes: "Laodicea, as the principal centre of the district, may have been the source of the cosmological speculation affecting the Colossian church, and the identification of its Jews with Gentile society may naturally have fostered an accommodation to pagan thought-forms."<sup>21</sup> Concerning that identification of the Laodicean Jews with pagan society, Hemer says, "The Jews of Laodicea may have become so integrated with their affluent society that they were indistinguishable within it,

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<sup>21</sup> Hemer, 184.

perhaps even leaders in its commercial expansion.”<sup>22</sup>

To affirm that Christ is the *arche* of God’s creation, that he is the Amen and the faithful and true witness, is to set the stage for a stinging rebuke of Laodicean complacency, a spiritual complacency born, perhaps, of their thinking of themselves as outstanding members of pagan society, and of their consequent failure to live out the obligations of the uniqueness of their Christian identity.

Rev. 3.15: οἶδα σου τὰ ἔργα, ὅτι οὔτε ψυχρὸς εἶ οὔτε ζεστός.  
ὄφελον ψυχρὸς ἢ ὁ ζεστός

I know your [*sou*, your, sing.] works, that you are neither  
cold nor hot;  
I wish you were cold or hot.

In each of the seven messages, after the Christological titles, the risen Christ states that he knows the spiritual situation of that church. In all but two of the messages, those to Smyrna and Pergamum, he declares that he knows “your works.” In Smyrna, a struggling, severely persecuted church, Christ says that he knows their “tribulation and poverty. . .and the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (2:9). In Pergamum, another persecuted church, one of whose members, Antipas, had been killed, apparently martyred for the faith (2:13), he starts off by saying, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s

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<sup>22</sup> Hemer, 183.

throne is" (2:13). Concerning what the word "works" refers to here in the message to the Laodiceans and in the other messages, Boring states that John's concern "is with responsible Christian conduct; John's word for this is 'works.'"<sup>23</sup> It is in the "context of the action of the Christian community in the face of the claims of the cultural religion that John's emphasis on 'works' is to be understood."<sup>24</sup>

Christ starts his critique of the Laodicean church's conduct by decrying their spiritual temperature--they are neither cold nor hot. He goes on to express his wish that they were one or the other, and then he says:

Rev. 3:16: ουτως, οτι χλιαρος ει και ουτε ζεστος ουτε ψυχρος, μελλω σε εμεσαι εκ του στοματος μου.

So, since you are tepid and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of my mouth.

These water temperature metaphors seem to be related to natural physical features in the area around Laodicea, namely of the water supply. In his foreward to Hemer's work on the messages to the seven churches, Aune says that although " a great deal about the water supply of Laodicea remains unknown, the identification of a local reference in this case seem [sic] eminently justified."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Boring, 95.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Hemer, xxi

*Spencer*

“Laodicea had no local springs and the waters of the Lycus river were not dependable, so they constructed an aqueduct from the hot springs five miles away at Denizli. The waters of Laodicea were tepid and emetic, in contrast to the hot, medicinal waters of Hierapolis and the pure, cold waters of Colossae.”<sup>26</sup>

So what does Christ mean by this metaphor? Let us read on to the following verse:

Rev. 3:17: *οτι λεγεις οτι Πλουσιος ειμι και πεπλουτηκα και ουδεν χρειαν εχω, και ουκ οιδασ οτι συ ει ο ταλαιπωρος και ελεεινος και πτωχος και τυφλος και γυμνος.*

because you say, “I am rich and have become wealthy and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are the wretched and pitiful one, and poor and blind and naked.

It is evident that the Laodicean church is characterized in Christ’s view by some sort of false sense of self-sufficiency. This is a spiritual condition, but may have to do both with spiritual and material conditions in the Laodicean church. There is something so repugnant about this condition that John’s Christ is ready to vomit the Laodicean church out of his mouth (3:16) like disgustingly unpalatable water. Some scholars have emphasized the well-documented pride of material self-sufficiency in the secular community of Laodicea, which also infected the church there, while others have detected in this message an allusion to some kind of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



pride in charismatic spirituality or to a “realized eschatology” in the Laodicean church.

The Roman historian Tacitus (Annals 14.27) chronicled that the city of Laodicea was so wealthy that when it was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60 “it was able to refuse imperial financial assistance in rebuilding.”<sup>27</sup> Aune concludes that “though the city did reject the offer of an imperial subsidy to help in rebuilding. . .it seems appropriate to understand the ‘wealth’ of the Laodiceans figuratively.”<sup>28</sup> Regarding this question, Boring makes two comments: (1) “The ‘riches’ of which the Laodicean church boasted were probably not only or even primarily material riches but the spiritual riches enjoyed by Christians who supposed they were already living in the fulfilled time of prophetic phenomena and spiritual bliss.”<sup>29</sup> (2) “The reputation of Sardis as a ‘live’ church (3:1) and the Laodiceans’ view of themselves as ‘rich’ (3:17) probably refer to the charismatic enthusiasm of their realized eschatology.”<sup>30</sup>

Jürgen Roloff and Aune cite 1 Corinthians 4:8 in

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<sup>27</sup> Aune, 249.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>29</sup> Boring, 94

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 97.

commenting on the Laodiceans' spiritual self-satisfaction.<sup>31</sup> In 1 Corinthians 4:8 the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!" Roloff writes:

The Christians in Laodicea were living in the self-satisfied certainty that they had already received salvation as a sure possession. In this respect, they were forgetting that this gift of salvation required radical obedience, which shows itself within the church by a love that serves and outside the church by courageous public testimony. . .it seems here that the issue is not so much material self-satisfaction as it is the proud boasting about an ostensible spiritual possession (cf. 2:9), for it corresponds to the manner of thinking of an enthusiasm influenced by Gnosticism (cf. 1Cor. 4:8); it is an enthusiasm that lives in the conviction that a final profound knowledge and perfection has already been achieved.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar vein Aune states: "The claim that they [the Laodicean church] are rich indicates pride in the possession of salvation, similar to 1 Cor. 4:8."<sup>33</sup> *Pace* Aune, Roloff, and Boring,

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<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Roloff, The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary, Continental Commentaries, trans. John E. Alsup (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 64-65; Aune, 259.

<sup>32</sup> Roloff, 64-65.

<sup>33</sup> Aune, 259.

Hemer emphasizes the material wealth and proud self-sufficiency of Laodicea. After extensive documentation of the wealth and proud self-reliance of the Laodiceans, Hemer concludes “that there is good reason for seeing Rev. 3:17 against the background of the boasted affluence of Laodicea.”<sup>34</sup>

The title which he gives to the section of the book in which he develops this argument is *Propriis Opibus*, taken from the previously mentioned Annals of Tacitus, 14.27.<sup>35</sup> The Latin phrase means “own works,” and Hemer sees it as similar in import to the Greek *ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων*, “out of the [or, one’s] own,” which phrase or an equivalent is found in various inscriptions from Laodicea datable to this period.<sup>36</sup> In stating that the Laodiceans had received no help in rebuilding after the devastating earthquake of 60 AD (although such help was typical and customary<sup>37</sup>), Tacitus wrote that the reconstruction had been *propriis opibus*--that they had relied on their “own works.” The Greek inscriptions that Hemer cites, concerning individual benefactors in Laodicea, indicate a similar pride and self-sufficiency, and also, according to Hemer, a certain

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<sup>34</sup> Hemer, 191-95.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 193, 194-95.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

ostentatious quality. Hemer's conclusion concerning the Laodicean church was that the message directed to them in 3:14-22 "exposed" them "as partaking of the standards of the society in which it lived." "It was spiritually self-sufficient and saw no need of Christ's aid."<sup>38</sup>

Accordingly, Christ's words to the Laodicean church that they were "wretched, and pitiful. . .and poor" can be seen as a stinging rebuke to a general Laodicean ethos which the church in some measure shared. The Laodiceans no doubt saw themselves in their self-reliance as superior to the poor and inept, to beggars and to those on the margins of acceptable society who had trouble taking care of themselves. When Christ says to them, "you do not know that you are the miserable and pitiful one" (οὐκ οἶδας ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ ταλαιπώρος καὶ ἐλεεινός), he is reversing that estimate that they had of themselves in relation to others. Hemer writes about this verse: "There is a strong emphasis in σὺ, and in the use of the article before the predicate." He then quotes R. H. Charles' translation<sup>39</sup> "It is thou who art self-satisfied and boastful that art the wretched one *par excellence*."<sup>40</sup>

The words "blind" and "naked" of verse 17 may also have

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<sup>38</sup> Hemer, 195.

<sup>39</sup> Charles, Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, 1:96.

<sup>40</sup> Hemer, 196.

a direct correlation to Laodicean society and economic life, especially when seen in relation to the verse that follows, in which Christ counsels:

Rev. 3:18: συμβουλευω σοι αγορασαι παρ εμου χρυσιον  
πεπυρωμενον εκ πυροσ ινα πλουτησης,  
και ματια λευκα ινα περιβαλη και μη φανερωθη η αισχυνη της  
γυμνοτητοσ σου και κολλυριον εγχρισαι τουσ οφθαλμουσ σου ινα  
βλεπησ

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that  
you can become rich,  
and white garments so that you can be clothed and the  
shame of your nakedness will not appear,  
and eye salve to apply as an ointment to your eyes so  
that you can see.

We have already seen evidence of Laodicean wealth, and there are specific indications in ancient literature (Horace, Strabo, Cicero)<sup>41</sup> of Laodicea's being established as a banking center. In other words, Laodicea was known for its cash, and her citizens were proud of that reputation. Two sources of her wealth were clothing and medical goods and services, probably specifically eye salve.

With respect to the "white garments," Hemer writes that commentators "as early as Trench (p. 207) [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia, 3rd ed. (London, 1867)] have seen allusion to the clothing industry of Laodicea and in particular a

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<sup>41</sup> Hemer, 191-92.

contrast with the glossy black wool of its sheep.”<sup>42</sup> Hemer says that our knowledge today of the ancient Laodicean wool industry rests primarily on the record left by the geographer and historian Strabo (ca. 63 B.C.E.-ca. 21 C.E.), whose Geography he quotes: “The country around Laodicea produces sheep remarkable not only for the softness of their wool, in which they surpass even that of Miletus, but also for its raven-black colour. And they get a splendid revenue from it . . . .”<sup>43</sup>

Regarding the “eye salve,” Hemer and many others thoroughly document the presence in the first century C.E. of a famous medical center in Laodicea,<sup>44</sup> and even specifically of a renowned ophthalmologist, Demosthenes Philaletes.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, that an eye salve was produced or marketed in Laodicea cannot rise above the probability provided by indirect evidence. Hemer, though, concludes that such evidence is considerable. At any rate it seems indisputable that Laodicea was well known for its ophthalmic arts, and that such arts at that time would have undoubtedly involved the use of eye salves. Hemer writes that there is

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<sup>42</sup> Hemer, 199.

43 <sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 196-99.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 198.

“considerable circumstantial reason for connecting the ‘eyesalve’ motif with Laodicea. The city probably marketed extensively and profitably an ointment developed locally from available materials, whose exact composition may have been kept secret from commercial rivals. The church in Laodicea, the city where they claimed to treat physical myopia, was blind to its spiritual blindness.”<sup>46</sup>

From the historical record it is clear that Laodicea was a thriving commercial center, and the evident judgment of the writer of the Book of Revelation was that the church of Laodicea had some kind of unfounded sense of self-sufficiency. The allusions made in this section to the thriving commerce of Laodicea and to the great importance accorded to local civic life by its citizenry are not limited to the white garments and the eye salve and the gold. The fact that Christ says “buy” from me is surely another allusion to the commercial life of the city, and the use of the word “counsel” may well be an allusion to the city’s civic life. *Sumbouleuo*, in Greek, is a word that can be used in the context of the deliberative proceedings, proposals, decisions, and acts of councils and governing bodies and the people who compose them. In the Gospel of John, for example, the word is used in 18:14, where Caiphas is said to have been the one who “counseled” the Jews of the

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<sup>46</sup> Hemer, 199.

Sanhedrin that it was necessary for one man, Jesus, to die for the whole nation and for all the children scattered abroad (John 11:47-53). In his message to the Laodiceans the risen Christ is using the language of civic life and commerce, with specific references to local commerce, to reprove and enlighten the Laodicean church concerning their true spiritual condition so that they can repent (3:19) and be “overcomers,” sharing in Christ’s spiritual triumph over all the forces arrayed against God and the truth.

Besides its allusion to Laodicean society, the reference to clothes has reverberations in other parts of Revelation that help to elucidate its meaning here in 3:18. Other references to white clothing are found in 3:4,5; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9,13,14; and 19:14. But we find a reference that is especially closely linked to 3:18 in 16:15: “Behold, I will come like a thief. Blessed is the person who remains vigilant and keeps his clothing, so that he does not walk around naked and get seen in that unseemly condition.”<sup>47</sup> Concerning the meaning in 16:15 of the Greek word for “keep,” *tereo*, and the symbolism of keeping one’s clothing, Harald Riesenfeld comments: “the verb is governed by the metaphor: the garment is equivalent to the state of salvation, which is to be maintained.”<sup>48</sup> Regarding the

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<sup>47</sup> Tr. Gary R. Curtis.

<sup>48</sup>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. “τηρεω,” 8: 143, by [Harald] Riesenfeld.



symbolism of the term “garment,” Aune writes that it was used “perhaps by extension as a metaphor for a heavenly reward. . .and a symbol of salvation or immortality,” and cites Rev. 3:4, 18; 6:11; 7:9, 13 in connection with the heavenly reward.<sup>49</sup>

It seems clear that Christ’s words to the Laodiceans are a rebuke to some aspect of their spiritual condition that is keeping them from perceiving their need to keep their loyalty to Christ, their Christian spirituality, foremost in their hearts and lives. They cannot see--they need Christ’s help even to recognize that they must change. They need to apply Christ’s spiritual ointment to their spiritual eyes--the word *enchrio*, a compound form of *chrío*, from which the word “Christ,” the anointed one, is derived, is the Greek in 3:17 for “apply ointment.” They do not recognize that their commitment to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:2, 9; 20:4) has been weakened and compromised by their excessive concern with, and indeed by their embrace of the values of the surrounding society. The Laodiceans’ nakedness is clear to Christ, but they need to turn to him, to repent (3:19), so that they too can see their nakedness and become clothed, and continue to be clothed in Christ’s heavenly blessing, no matter what the cost.

Of all the messages, this one to Laodicea is the most severe. Most commentators seem to say that Christ has nothing

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<sup>49</sup> Aune, 223.

good to say about them at all, and certainly this is true of their “works.” Christ commends none of them on anything that they are doing. To a church and a community so proud of themselves, no doubt it was necessary to take direct, narrowly focused, unwavering aim at their false pride and self-sufficiency in order to repudiate them in a completely unambiguous and convincing manner, leaving no room--not anywhere or in any way--for self-congratulation, justification, or excuse. Yet in the next verse, 3:19, Christ expresses his love.

Rev. 3:19: εγω ουσ εαν φιλω ελεγχω και παιδευω-  
ζηλευε ουν και μετανοησον

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline;  
be fervent, therefore, and repent.

Christ assures the Laodiceans that his severe reproof is meliorative; he desires only that they repent and receive his promises (which he makes to them in the next two verses). The Greek word “love’ in this verse is *phileo*, and it “carries a warm emotional content; it can also mean ‘to kiss’ (see Mark 9:44).”<sup>50</sup> The word for “I” in Greek, *ego*, is emphasized, just as “you” is emphasized in verse 17. The grammatical category of person, “I,” “you,” et cetera, is built into the conjugated verb form, and if the pronoun is explicitly expressed, it is emphasized. Christ is drawing

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<sup>50</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and Howard A. Hatton, A Handbook on the Revelation to John (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 82.

attention to his prophetic and sovereign authority to reprove and discipline, in contrast to the self-satisfying and mutually flattering kinds of negotiations in which pillars of commercial society engage in order to carry out their buying and selling and community boosterism. The products that Christ is selling, his gold, and his garments, and his eye salve, are very different from the goods of the prosperous commerce and municipal life of the city of Laodicea.

This verse is also a clear allusion to Proverbs 3:11,12: “My child, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.” Forms of the words for reprove and discipline in Rev. 3:19, *ελεγχω* and *παιδευω*, appear also in the LXX translation into Greek of Prov. 3:11, 12.<sup>51</sup>

The Laodiceans’ lukewarmness is to be corrected by fervency, or zeal. The Spanish of the revised Reina-Valera version of 1960, widely used by Spanish-speaking Protestants, may suggest an important implication of the verb *zeleuo*, “be fervent.” The Spanish words in Reina-Valera 1960 that translate *zeleuo* are “sé celoso,” whose primary meaning is “be jealous,” but which can also mean to

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<sup>98</sup>Septuaginta, ed. Alfred Rahlfs (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979); *Libri poetici et prophetici*, 2:187.

be zealous, or fervent.<sup>52</sup>

Zeal in the Jewish tradition implies single-minded devotion to the one true God, reflecting God's jealous desire for such exclusive devotion. In the initial presentation of the Ten Commandments, for example, in Exodus 20, God says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:4,5). The word for jealous here in the LXX is *zelotes*.<sup>53</sup>

The word *zelotes*, as used in the New Testament, has a meaning which is very pertinent to our discussion. Louw and Nida define it (in noun form): "one who is deeply committed to something and therefore zealous."<sup>54</sup> Louw and Nida classify *zelotes* with the number 25.77 and place it immediately after *zeloo*, *zeleuo*, 25.76 (*zeleuo* is the word in Rev. 3:19). Their definition for *zeloo*, *zeleuo*: "to be deeply committed to something, with the implication

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<sup>52</sup> Grijalbo, Diccionario Enciclopédico (Barcelona: Ediciones Grijalbo, 1995), 405, s. v. "celoso."

<sup>53</sup> Septuaginta, 119-20.

<sup>54</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:298.

of accompanying desire--'to be earnest, to set one's heart on, to be completely intent on.'"

The Laodiceans' assimilation to local pagan culture may have involved too close an association with the local trade guilds and their idolatrous practices. (This was probable in Thyatira and Pergamum, too, and perhaps also in Sardis, and even in Ephesus, as well, but not so probable in Smyrna and Philadelphia, the only two churches in which none of their members are called on to repent). G. K. Beale writes, "the problem with the Laodicean Christians lay in their willingness to identify in some way with the trade guilds and their patron deities. Perhaps this identification merely consisted in identifying with the guilds and not testifying to their faith in Christ as a polemic against the guilds' loyalty to their patron deities who purportedly were responsible for the economic prosperity of each trade."<sup>55</sup> The standard conviction of typical, practicing Jews was that God was jealous of any kind of halfhearted or divided loyalty. According to that standard, the Laodiceans needed to reflect their appreciation of God's zealous love with more single-minded, faithful devotion of their own. They were deficient in the zeal and fervor required to be willing to stand up for God and Christ, and against the pagan deities, even if this put their social and economic status--

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<sup>55</sup> G. K. Beale, John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 292.

not to mention possibly their lives--in jeopardy.

There is an instructive parallel in Exodus 34:12-16, in which God is renewing his covenant with the children of Israel and commanding them to make no covenant with the “inhabitants of the land” (Exod. 34:12, 15). The phrase “inhabitants of the land” is a reference to the Canaanites, Hittites, and other inhabitants of Palestine at the time, but the English word “land” here corresponds to *aretz* in Hebrew and *ge* in the LXX, both of which can also mean “earth.” Accordingly, the translation of the same phrase, both in Greek and in Hebrew, could also be, in other contexts, “dwellers of/or upon the earth,” or “inhabitants of/or upon the earth,” the expression which is so significant in Revelation (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8,12,14; 17:2,8). (A variant of the expression occurs in Rev. 14:6, *kathemenoi epi tes ges*, those sitting/or the sitters upon the earth. The LXX in Exodus 34:12 has almost exactly the same expression, with only the minor difference of having *en* as a prefix to *kathemenoi*: *enkathemenoi epi tes ges*).

In Exod. 34:12-16 the Lord vigorously inveighs against the gods of the pagan inhabitants of the land, saying to His people, in verses 14-16: “for you shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous [*zeloton* in the LXX], is a jealous [*zelotes*] God. You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of

the land [people sitting/(or dwelling) upon the earth/(or land) (*yosheb ha'aretz* in the Hebrew)], for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice. And you will take wives from among their daughters for your sons, and their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods.” (In the foregoing I have added some explanatory insertions to the NSRV according to the Hebrew and the LXX ). According to Aune, the Hebrew phrase, *yosheb ha'aretz*, or *yoshbe ha'aretz*, “occurs frequently in early Jewish literature reflecting an awareness of the nations of the world, often in a universalistic eschatology in early Jewish apocalyptic, where it also has a predominantly negative connotation.”<sup>56</sup>

In his book, *I Saw a New Earth*, Paul Minear writes extensively about the implications of the terms “earth” and “those who dwell on earth,” or “earth-dwellers,” in the Book of Revelation. He says the “earth-dwellers . . . constitute the citizenry of Babylon who get drunk on the wine of her adulteries . . . who are known by their hostility to the faithful.”<sup>57</sup> “Earth most frequently points to that realm which has been corrupted and destroyed by false

<sup>56</sup> Aune, 240.

<sup>57</sup> Minear, 261. Also see 261-69 for a discussion of “earth” in John’s lexicon.

sovereignties and loyalties.” “In John’s lexicon, if not in ours, it is entirely natural to speak of a new heaven and a new earth, and in so speaking to have in mind the actualities of God’s dwelling with men (21:1-3). We are therefore bound to distort his thought if we substitute for his word *earth* our own concept of a geological entity as something which can be conceived quite apart from any reference to God or man, and quite apart from the struggle between God and Satan. Similar distortions follow corresponding interpretations of the meaning of ‘the earth-dwellers’ or the ‘kings of the earth.’”<sup>58</sup>

Christians in Laodicea, and in other cities, were living in the midst of pagan culture, surrounded by idol-worshippers, earth-dwellers, who were not worshipers of the true God of Israel and the Christian church, in John’s view. They were often hostile to God’s worship and God’s worshipers, and even when they were not hostile, they constituted a constant temptation and pressure to assimilate to their culture. The followers of Christ in Laodicea needed to keep separate from the influence of their pagan neighbors, according to John, with a fervent, jealous zeal for Christ and God, not compromising with them and their idolatrous culture in any way whatsoever.

The last word in verse 19, “repent,” *metanoeo* in Greek,

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<sup>58</sup> Minear, 264-65.



is an important word in Revelation, especially in the messages to the churches. It occurs in five of the seven messages to the churches, in chapters 2 and 3, and also in three other passages, in chapters 9 and 16. The only two churches in which none of its members are told to repent--Smyrna and Philadelphia--are the only two that are not reprimanded for anything, and are also the only two that are said to be having problems with a "synagogue of Satan," "who say they are Jews, and are not" (2:9; 3:9).

Louw and Nida define *metanoeo*: "to change one's way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness--'to repent, to change one's way, repentance. . . .' Though in English a focal component of repent is the sorrow or contrition that a person experiences because of sin, the emphasis in *μετανοεο* and *μετανοια* seems to be more specifically the total change, both in thought and behavior, with respect to how one should both think and act."<sup>59</sup> Concerning "repent" as used in 2:5, which also applies here in 3:19,<sup>60</sup> Bratcher and Hatton write: "The aorist imperative implies a decisive act . . . . There are various ways of expressing repentance, and a translator should use one that denotes a thorough, radical change, and not just a temporary feeling

<sup>59</sup> Louw and Nida, 510.

<sup>60</sup> Bratcher and Hatton, 82: "repent is in the aorist tense, denoting a once-for-all change of mind (see 2.5)."

of regret or remorse that does not include a determination to abandon the sin.”<sup>61</sup>

The Christians in Laodicea needed to make a thorough, radical change in both thought and behavior, once and for all. They needed to perceive their real spiritual state. They needed to see that they were compromisers and assimilationists who were only lukewarm for Christ. They needed to turn their backs on the blandishments of the pagan culture in the midst of which they lived, and they needed to resist its pressures staunchly, no matter what. They needed to do this because Christ commanded it, and also because of what he was about to promise them in the next two verses.

Rev: 3:20: Ἰδου εστηκα επι την θυραν και κρουω-  
εαν τις ακουση της φωνης μου και ανοιξη την θυραν,  
εισελευσομαι προς αυτον και δειπνησω μετ αυτου και αυτοσ μετ εμου.

Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking;  
if anyone hears my voice and opens the door,  
I will come in to him and dine with him and he with me.

Concerning the word “Behold,” *idou*, Aune says that it “functions as a marker of strong emphasis” the thirteen times it is used in narrative in Revelation, including here in 3:20.<sup>62</sup> Bratcher and Hatton say that it is “a way of calling the attention of the reader

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<sup>61</sup> Bratcher and Hatton, 42.

<sup>62</sup> Aune, 53.

to what follows.”<sup>63</sup> Today’s English Version (TEV), translates it “Listen” here in 3:20.<sup>64</sup> What follows is among the best known and most often-quoted parts Book of Revelation.

Concerning this verse all manner of homiletic, liturgical, and didactic material has been produced. It seems to lend itself to many uses, according to one’s needs and inclinations. Some have stressed the humility of Christ in standing patiently at the door, humbly awaiting admission. Others have pointed to Christ standing at the door as an image of of a sovereign lord demanding his rights. Bruce M. Metzger, for example, calls it “the most tender message found in any of the seven letters.”<sup>65</sup> In commenting on the scene as “a simple but profound picture of grace and free will in action,” he refers to Holman Hunt’s famous painting, *The Light of the World*, in which the Lord is knocking on a door with no handle or latch on the outside, about which Metzger comments that the door “ must be opened from within. Christ promises to enter when the resident opens the door.”

Caird, on the other hand, says that Christ “stands knocking, not with the timid tap that requests admission, but with the imperious hammering of the divine initiative, loud enough to

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<sup>63</sup> Bratcher and Hatton, 82, 23.

<sup>64</sup> Today’s English Version : New Testament, 2nd ed. (New York: American Bible Society), 1992.

<sup>65</sup> Metzger, Breaking the Code, 45-46.

penetrate even the deaf ears of Laodicea.”<sup>66</sup> Justo González, similarly, stresses the “imperious” nature of Christ’s knocking. He writes that Christ’s request is not the mere “supplication of a visitor”, “el ruego de un visitante,” in the Spanish, but “la demanda imperiosa del dueño de la casa,”<sup>67</sup> the imperious demand of the owner of the house. Bratcher and Hatton, in contrast, write that Christ is “seeking (not demanding) admission.”<sup>68</sup>

Surely, many different interpretations and applications could be legitimate, but it is important to note that it would be emphasis on different elements of the context, different aspects of the work as a whole, and different theological approaches that would legitimate these differing interpretations--it would not be the words of the verse themselves. The word “knock,” for instance, *krouo* in Greek, is defined by Louw and Nida simply as “to knock on a door, as a means of signaling one’s presence to those inside--‘to knock.’”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Bauer gives only a neutral definition of the word, without indicating any connotation of either meekness or

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<sup>66</sup> Caird, 57.

<sup>67</sup> González, Tres Meses en la escuela de Patmos, 36.

<sup>68</sup> Bratcher and Hatton, 83.

<sup>69</sup> Louw and Nida, 224.

imperiousness.<sup>70</sup> Liddell and Scott give various meanings of the word (10 distinct meanings altogether, giving no indication at all of the particular appropriateness of either meekness or imperiousness.<sup>71</sup>

When those of us who are serving in the role of teachers or commentators give our interpretations, then, we should be careful, when we incline one way or the other on certain points, not to give the impression that it is the words by themselves that are leading us to our conclusions, but other factors. Justo González, for example, aptly balances out the note of hope in this verse by highlighting the sternness of Christ's rebuke. He writes that while it is a word of hope, it is also one of judgment: "al mismo tiempo que

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<sup>70</sup>Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. κρουω, 453-54. Translation and adaptation of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur. 2nd ed. revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's 5th ed., 1958.

<sup>71</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v., 999-1000, rev. and augmented by Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie. In the Supplement, 1968, there is a brief bibliographical addition in an entry for κρουω that in no way alters the import of the information given above. See A Greek-English Lexicon. A Supplement, ed. E. A. Barber (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), s.v. κρουω, 89.

es palabra de esperanza, lo es también de juicio.”<sup>72</sup> As he develops this point, though, in his book that is intended primarily for Bible study among lay people in Spanish-speaking congregations, one could easily get the mistaken impression that he is basing his conclusions significantly on the word in the original text that is translated “knock”--“llamar,” in Spanish.

González writes:

Jesús . . . está a la puerta, llamando--y la palabra que aquí se usa no se refiere al toque suave de un visitante, sino al golpe recio que el amo impaciente daría con el aldabón de la puerta de su casa. Le han dejado fuera de su propia casa, y el aldabonazo de llamada, más que el ruego de un visitante, es la demanda imperiosa del dueño de la casa. Quienes no le abren, no son sólo sordos, sino rebeldes y usurpadores.”<sup>73</sup>

English translation of the above (Gary R. Curtis):

Jesus . . . is at the door, knocking--and the word that is used here does not refer to the soft knock of a visitor, but to the loud knock that the impatient master would give with the knocker of the door of his home. They have left him outside his own home, and the loud knock, rather than being the supplication of a visitor, is the imperious demand of the owner of the house. Those who do not open to him, are not only deaf, but rebellious usurpers.

In this expressively descriptive paragraph González has given

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<sup>72</sup> González, 35.

<sup>73</sup> González, *ibid.*, 35-36. The translation here into English is that of the writer of this study, Gary R. Curtis.

us an interpretation that is legitimate and homiletically helpful, but when he writes, “and the word that is used here does not refer . . .” the reader could easily infer that González is writing about the underlying Greek word itself, and not about its possible legitimate implications in this context. If one were, for example, very simply to make the subtle change, “and the word as it is used here,” rather than “and the word that is used here,” there would be much less chance of misunderstanding.

Wainwright says that “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock” “is a famous example of an exhortation that concerns the inner life. Although these words may allude to a personal communion with Christ at the last day, they are also likely to refer to a present-day communion with him in the eucharist or in private devotion.”<sup>74</sup> Certainly many commentators down through the ages to the present day have seen a reference and emphasis here on private devotion and/or to communal eucharistic worship,<sup>75</sup> and there seems to be no need to deny the appropriateness of these applications, but Bauckham makes an interesting case here for the primacy of an eschatological reference.<sup>76</sup> In three previous

<sup>74</sup> Wainwright, 209.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1993), 106-9.

messages, to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis, the church as a whole (through the angel of the church) is commanded to repent (in Thyatira, it is Jezebel and her followers who are commanded to repent), and Bauckham points out that “this command is in each case followed by an announcement of the imminent *parousia* (2:5, 16; 3:3)...; 3:20 occupies the analogous position in the message to Laodicea.”<sup>77</sup>

He goes on to say that “without the eschatological interpretation of 3:20 this one of the seven messages would be lacking in any reference to the impending eschatological crisis which pervades the rest of the seven and provides their major link with the rest of the Apocalypse.”<sup>78</sup> Bauckham also attempts to make a case for the widespread familiarity among Christians at the time of John’s writing with the parables of the Watching Servants and the Thief, and sees here in 3:20 a “deparabolization” of the Watching Servants parable found in Luke 12:36-37,<sup>79</sup> that would still retain enough familiar elements to remind early Christians of the parable. He writes that deparabolization “occurs when the application of the

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<sup>77</sup> Bauckham, 107.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 97-109.



parable breaks down the literary structure of the parable as story,”<sup>80</sup> and sees in 3:20 an allusion to the narrative of the men waiting for their lord to return, even though very little of the narrative itself in Luke 12:37-38 is retained. The eschatological allusion would be clear, none the less, he avers.

Significantly, Luke’s account contains a reference to a master’s knocking and to his servants’ opening the door for him, as in Rev. 3:20. Luke 12:36-7 reads:

be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.

The word for knocking is the same Greek word as in Rev. 3:20, *krouo*, and the reference to opening the door employs the same Greek words as in Rev. 3:20 as well. One clear and significant difference between the two passages, however, besides the explicit reference to a wedding banquet in Luke, omitted in Revelation, is that Christ says nothing in Revelation about taking the role of a servant (*doulos* in Greek) and serving (*diakoneo* in Greek) his servants, or slaves (*douloi*, in Greek). In Revelation the promise is simply that, “I will come in to him and dine with him and he with

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<sup>80</sup> Bauckham, 99.

me.”<sup>81</sup>

Aune says that three features of Luke 12:35-38 (and also of the version found in Mark 13:33-37) are absent from Rev. 3:20:

“(1) the central character is the *owner of the house*, (2) *he is returning to his own house*, and (3) the servants or doorkeeper are charged with *watching for his unexpected return*.” While it is true that none of these features is explicitly present in Rev. 3:20, it seems that the work of interpretation in many instances requires the making of some valid inferences from the nearer and more remote context and scope of the work in question. And if Christ is truly lord, lord of all, would he not then be the legitimate *owner* of all and be returning to his *own house*? And as far as his servants’ being charged to watch for his “unexpected return” is concerned, surely few things are more apparent in the work of Revelation as a whole, and specifically in the messages to the seven churches, than the expectation of the lord’s imminent return and the need to be ready for it.

The exact time of the lord’s return is not known in

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<sup>81</sup> Roloff asserts that this part of Rev. 3:20 is a third feature in common with Luke 12:35-38: “the reward of these servants with a common meal prepared by the returning master,” Roloff, 65. However, in Rev. 3:20 nothing is said about the master’s preparing the meal. At most, the language seems to support the idea of some sort of reciprocity in the meal-- “I will dine with him, and he with me.”

Revelation, but that element is present also in Luke 12:35-38 and Mark 13:37. Indeed it is not the master's return as such that is unexpected there, but rather is it that the exact day or hour cannot be known precisely. In Revelation, similarly, the expectation of the end is a central concern, but as far as the expected time of arrival of the end, all that is proclaimed is that it is near and that it will be soon.

As Boring notes, the "motif of the nearness of the End is woven throughout into the fabric of the Apocalypse."<sup>82</sup> In the Book of Revelation in general, and in the brief scope of the messages to the seven churches in particular, the nearness of the end means the coming of Christ. In the messages to the churches Christ speaks twice explicitly of "coming soon": in 2:16 and 3:11. In 2:25 Christ tells the faithful in Thyatira: "what you have, hold fast until I come." In the verse under discussion, 3.20, the mere image by itself of being "at the door," according to Boring, is "a temporal image found in apocalyptic which reflects the shortness of time before the coming of Christ: He is already at the door (cf. Mark 13:29; Luke 12:36; James 5:9)."<sup>83</sup> In the introductory first three verses of Revelation it is stated that what is going to be happening, as will be detailed in the rest of the book, will happen "soon," and that "the

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<sup>82</sup> Boring, 68-69.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 69.

time is near.” In the concluding section of Revelation, 22:6-22:21, repeated affirmations of Christ’s coming soon and that the end is near are made. Whether or not Bauckham is right and Rev. 3:20 reflects the phenomenon of “deparabolization,” or if rather it is the fruit of some other process, the real possibility, if not probability, of eschatological reference seems clear.

Furthermore, there is no reason why the reference has to be limited in an either/or, exclusive fashion to either eschatological or non-eschatological, one or the other, not both. No. Aune writes that “it appears that the metaphorical character of the saying exhibits a polyvalent ambiguity” (which he attributes to “the author’s combination of imagery from Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman traditions”).<sup>84</sup> Aune says also that “Rev. 3:20 needs be interpreted neither eschatologically (i.e., the appearance of Christ at the door understood as a metaphor for the Parousia) nor individualistically (Christ knocks at the door of the heart).”<sup>85</sup> It seems to the writer of this current study on the message to Laodicea that even if the primary and overriding intention was some kind of eschatological one, i.e., “get ready for my imminent coming!” then the clear denotation of the warning would be to do it now, and at the very least the obedient servant would enjoy in this world the

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<sup>84</sup>Aune, 254.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

satisfaction of knowing that he or she was getting ready appropriately for the next one and could enjoy now in this world the excitement and blessing of faith-filled hope and expectation for the next. And, surely, whatever crises and challenges one might face short of “the Great Eschatological Ordeal,” one would be able to face them with more courage and more resolve, and thus suffer less, at least psychologically, or spiritually, thanks to one’s faith and hope.

On the other hand, if the thought of the original communication in Rev. 3:20 were rather of the blessing of this-worldly communion with Christ, would there not still remain some kind of expectation of transcendent good as well? Even within the limits of a very secular and this-worldly orientation, is not every good we experience an instance of a vast and infinite array of possible goods we and others might experience? And even the crises and challenges that we face which we do not regard as eschatological, do we not endure them the better in the hope that we can get through them to something in some way better, after the ordeal is past? It seems that transcendence and immanence are present to some degree in every experience, whether we recognize them or not. Perhaps we would do well to recognize both of these elements in order to be able to experience the full benefit of both

dimensions.<sup>86</sup>

Rev 3:21: ο νικων δωσω αυτω καθισαι μετ εμου εν τω θρονω μου,  
ωσ καγω ενικησα και εκαθισα μετα του πατροσ μου εν τω θρονω  
αυτου.

To the conqueror, I will grant to sit with me on my  
throne,  
as I, too, have conquered and have sat down with my  
father on his throne.

Every one of the seven message concludes, either at the very end or very near it, as here, with a promise to the “conqueror.” The Greek words are *ho nikon*, the one conquering, in 2:11, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, and here in 3:20, and *to nikonti*, to the one conquering, in 2:7 and 2:17. In each of the seven messages the verb form of *nikao* is a present participle. Boring writes that just as “the summary accomplishment of Jesus’ work on earth can be expressed simply that he ‘overcame’/ ‘conquered’ (3:21; 5:5), so the faithful Christian life can be summarized as ‘conquering’/‘overcoming.’”<sup>87</sup>

In each of the seven churches there is a challenge to the Christians to orient themselves to the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, and not to the standards of the earthly cities in which

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<sup>86</sup> These brief comments on transcendence and immanence owe much to John B. Cobb, Jr., especially to the work cited in this footnote, without in any way meaning to claim him as an authority for them. John B. Cobb, Jr. *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998). See especially ch. 3, “Creative Transformation as the Logos,” 62-81.

<sup>87</sup> Boring, 90-91.

they were living along with the previously discussed “earth-dwellers.”<sup>88</sup> All these cities were part of the Roman empire ruled from its capital in Rome--represented by the name “Babylon”<sup>89</sup> (Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21.) According to the risen Christ in John’s revelation, as long as the Christians remain faithful to Christ and the coming New Jerusalem and resist Babylon, they are in the process of conquering. If they can resist the pressures and the temptations until the end (Rev. 2:26), they will receive the rewards promised to the conquerors.

Boring says that each of the seven promises to the conqueror is a “flash-forward to the eschatological glory of chapters 20-22.”<sup>90</sup> Here in 3:20 the promise is to sit with Christ on his throne. A similar promise is given in Rev. 2:26-28.

To everyone who conquers and continues to do my  
works to the end,  
I will give authority over the nations;  
to rule them with an iron rod,  
as when clay pots are shattered--  
even as I also received authority from my Father.

In Rev. 20:4 the seer of Patmos sees “thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge.” The martyrs who stood firm “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” In 20:6 it is

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<sup>88</sup> See this study, 62-65.

<sup>89</sup> NRSV, 380, see note on Rev. 17:1-18:24.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 89.

declared that “they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.”

In 21:5 God is referred to as “the one who was seated on the throne,” and in 21:7 God says, “Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children”(NRSV). In 22:3 it is declared that in the New Jerusalem “the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it,” and in 22:6 that God’s servants “will reign forever and ever” (NRSV). The promise to the conqueror in 3:21 is nothing other than a promise to reign forever as God’s heir in the capital city, New Jerusalem, of the new heaven and new earth (21:1,2).

After the concluding formula in 3:22, repeated in all the messages, “let the one who has an ear hear what the spirit is saying to the churches,” the next major section of Revelation begins in chapter 4, and the image of one sitting on a throne is quickly taken up again. In verse 2, John is given a vision of the throne room of heaven: “there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!” The throne room scene is concluded in chapter 5 with a scene of song and worship. In verse 13 John hears “every creature in heaven and on earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing,



‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be  
blessing and honor and glory and might forever and  
ever!’

This evocation of everlasting praise and glory of Divine triumph and rule is an image of the glorious destiny in which each of the conquering Christians is promised a part, along with Christ, who has already conquered and whose victory is already assured. If the idea of two or more sitting on the same throne seems incongruous, it is important to note that figurative, symbolic language is being employed which is not to be pressed for overly exact, literal equivalence. As Boring develops at some length, the language of Revelation is “pictorial,” “non-objectifying,” “evocative,” “polyvalent,” “non-logical and non-inferential.”<sup>91</sup> Even though Revelation’s language and imagery are assuredly non-literal and non-objectifying, Aune documents the familiarity of the ancient world “with the image of a *bisellium*, a ‘double-throne.’”<sup>92</sup> That a multitude of conquerors would share the same throne is non-literal, evocative language, not characteristic of the time, but the concrete, objective image of two sharing the same throne, that of the *bisellium*, was well known. Here in Revelation the listener-reader is called on to envision Christ and God enthroned and ruling together,

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<sup>91</sup> Boring, 51-59.

<sup>92</sup> Aune, 262.

and then to move beyond that image to a mind- and heart-expanding vision of everlasting, infinite glory, as described in Rev. 7:9, for “an innumerable multitude.”

REV. 3:22: Ο ΕΧΩΝ ΟΥΣ ΑΚΟΥΣΑΤΩ ΤΙ ΤΟ ΠΝΕΥΜΑ ΛΕΓΕΙ ΤΑΙΣ  
ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΙΣ

Let the one who has an ear hear what the spirit is saying  
to the churches.

The message to the Laodicean congregation, like the other six, concludes, at or near the end: “let the one who has an ear hear what the spirit is saying to the churches” (Ο ΕΧΩΝ ΟΥΣ ΑΚΟΥΣΑΤΩ ΤΙ ΤΟ ΠΝΕΥΜΑ ΛΕΓΕΙ ΤΑΙΣ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΙΣ). As indicated at the beginning of the exegesis of this passage, the exact same ten Greek words are found in each of the seven messages. Accordingly, each of the seven messages is intended particularly for the local congregation named and also to all those in the various churches who have the spiritual ability to receive the message as it may apply to their situation or as they may in any way benefit spiritually from it. The word “let” here is an imperative.<sup>93</sup> It has nothing to do with permitting or not interfering, as the English word often implies. This is a third person imperative, a command in the third person, instead of the second.

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<sup>93</sup> Aune, 135. In talking about the identical construction used in 2:7a, Aune says that the “aor. imper. . . is in the aor. because a specific message is being presented for those who ought to have the ability to understand it; the implications of the message are not the issue here.”

Aune says that “this expression functions as a *proclamation* formula, i.e., as an injunction to the audience to pay attention to the message that has (or will be) delivered.”<sup>94</sup> Further, he states that “Let the person with an ear hear” is “an aphorism rooted in the Jesus tradition.” “it occurs seven times in the synoptic gospels.”<sup>95</sup> In speaking of the different “sayings of the exalted Jesus in Revelation that have the strongest claim for being derived from the tradition of the sayings of Jesus,” Aune writes:

comparison of these texts with the Synoptic texts they resemble does not indicate that John was personally familiar with written texts of any of the canonical Gospels. Yet that possibility cannot be absolutely excluded, particularly in view of the loose and fluid way in which early Christian authors quoted and alluded to both OT and NT texts...The authority of these texts was so well established that John was able to use allusions to them to authenticate the written presentation of his own revelatory encounter with the exalted Jesus. However, it is not necessary to suppose that these allusions were primarily the result of a fully conscious literary artifice. Rather, they appear to have been drawn from the distinctive modes of speech that entered into Christian discourse from both the Gospel texts themselves and the oral traditions within which such texts were transmitted.<sup>96</sup>

Besides the use in the seven messages of the idea that

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<sup>94</sup> Aune, 150.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 265.

one who has an ear is to listen, a very similar expression occurs in Rev. 13:9: *ei tis echei ous akousato*, if anyone has an ear, let him/or her hear. The theme of “hearing” occurs continually in Revelation. According to this writer’s count, forms of *akouo* occur 46 times in Revelation, almost all of them in reference to spiritual auditions and/or to spiritual understandings. The theme of hearing--and hearing well--is highlighted from the opening blessing in 1:3, “Blessed is he who reads, and those who hear the words of this prophecy...” to the warning in the closing in 22:18-19, “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to these things, God will bring upon him the plagues that are written in this book. And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the book of life, and from the holy city and from the things written in this book.”

In the concluding three verses of the seven messages to the churches, in 3:20-22, the word is used very prominently, as we have seen--“if anyone hears my voice” and “anyone who has an ear, hear” and is then taken up again almost immediately in the very first verse of the next section: “. . . and the first voice that I heard, like a trumpet, speaking with me . . .” (Rev. 4:1). The theme of “hearing” is one of many important repeated structural elements in the Book

of Revelation. As Bauckham says, “the astonishingly meticulous composition of the book creates a complex network of literary cross-references, parallels, contrasts, which inform the meaning of the parts and the whole.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Richard Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 18.

## CHAPTER 4

### Conclusion

We have seen in considerable detail how Revelation 3:14-22 challenges a church overly content with itself and its place in secular society. Without the element of true giving of oneself, of some kind of meaningful self-sacrifice, there is no true worship, no true spirituality, no true commitment to the sacred or the divine. Surely, one fact emerging from this study that differs greatly from received popular impressions is that not all of Revelation is intended to comfort the afflicted. The letter to the Laodiceans seems to have a great deal to do with the afflicting of the comfortable. Yet the assurance of God's love and acceptance are clearly and strongly present. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline . . . if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and go to him, and dine with him, and he with me." If the church in Laodicea turn from their self-satisfied, society-accommodating ways, their place in the messianic banquet is assured.

The message to Laodicea, as to all the churches in Asia, is

about God as revealed in Christ. In the message to Laodicea, emphasis is placed on Christ as “the amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.” None of the cultural and religious and economic activity of Laodicea or any of the other cities of the Roman Empire could compare with the divine witness to creation presented by Christ and his faithful church. Christians were to maintain a faithful witness in the midst of their societies and not to compromise in any way their zeal and unflagging devotion to the one true God and his conquering son, Jesus Christ.

At the very heart and root of the true worship of God is single-hearted, exclusive devotion. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind” (Matt. 22:37, 38--derived from Deut. 6:5). Any involvement with society that in any way compromised this whole-souled devotion was intolerable. It was a perverted and nauseating witness that must be vehemently rejected by God and Christ.

Perhaps for any self-aware part of the creation, and, notably, especially for human beings, a constant temptation is to think of oneself apart from and independent of the overall scheme of creation, and from the Creator. The monotheistic tradition enjoins constant devotion to the Creator and thankfulness for the privilege of participation in creation. In the Christian tradition, part

of the lesson of the crucified and risen and triumphant Christ is that even if whole-hearted devotion to the Creator does not result in a long and healthy and prosperous life in earthly society, there remains the sure, unbreakable promise of transcendent rewards awaiting the faithful. If we fail in some way in this present life to experience all the blessings the Creator promises us, the Redeemer promises us transcendent rewards if only we remain faithful.

In the case of the Laodicean Christians, apparently, health and prosperity were not eluding them. They were being distracted from true devotion to the transcendent God in another way. Surely those who made up the Church of the Laodiceans, in the judgment of the Risen Christ of Revelation, were too smitten with their own riches and self-sufficiency. They needed to recognize their spiritual poverty and turn back to the Source of all goodness and blessing. They needed to regain a fervent and single-minded devotion to their Creator.

The apocalyptic genre can be and has been much criticized for its otherworldliness, but surely the centrality of its concern with God and the sacred can be seen as integral to any kind of true spirituality. Whether one is suffering severe affliction (as the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, for example), or one is experiencing great blessing and fulfillment (as perhaps Laodicea and



Sardis, for example), or one is experiencing some intermediate situation of mixed blessing and affliction (as perhaps the other churches), the tendency to be excessively concerned with one's temporal situation at the expense of one's relation to the Transcendent is ever present. Elements of the apocalyptic genre are found not only in the Book of Revelation, but at many other points in the Bible, and the genre's strong emphasis on temporal transcendence can serve to balance the opposing tendency to turn one's back on transcendent values and become wholly immersed in whatever for the moment is before one's nose.

If one is looking only for a how-to-succeed-in-business kind of guidance for everyday, practical affairs, or, on the other hand, for specific eschatological predictions soon to be fulfilled, next week or next year, or within any literal calendrical framework, then one is sure to be disappointed in what the Book of Revelation truly offers. But if one recognizes that it is apocalyptic exhortation, directed originally to representative churches in Asia, and if one believes that transcendent spiritual values are supremely important, then one can find much of value in Revelation, and specifically in the messages to the churches in chapters 2 and 3, concluded in the message to the Laodiceans. The message to the Laodiceans lends itself particularly for application to those of us who find ourselves

adapting more or less well to our circumstances. Christians today, and those of other faiths as well, I believe, can learn to see ourselves in their situation, happy and well-adjusted, but insufficiently grounded and motivated by the transcendent.

If our salvation consists in something more than simply “getting our piece of the pie”—as important as that is, especially for those who have been unjustly denied participation in the benefits of society—then all messages of transcendent value have their place. For all their otherworldliness, they remind us that a soul without the garment of everlasting salvation is “poor and naked and blind,” immersed in the most wretched and miserable poverty. But the Savior is at the door, calling.

#### TRANSLATION IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH

3:14 και τω αγγελω της εν Λαοδικεια εκκλησιασ γραψον  
ταδε λεγει ο αμην, ο μαρτυσ ο πιστοσ και αληθινος, η αρχη της  
κτισεωσ του θεου

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea, write:  
thus says the amen, the faithful and true witness, the  
beginning of the creation of God.

Y al ángel de la iglesia en Laodicea, escribe:  
así dice el amén, el testigo fiel y verdadero,  
el principio de la creación de Dios.

Rev. 3:15 οίδα σου τα εργα, οτι ουτε ψυχροσ ει ουτε ζεστος.

οφελον ψυχροσ ησ η ζεστος.

I know your [*sou*, your, sing.] works, that you are neither cold nor hot;

I wish you were cold or hot.

Conozco tus obras, que ni frío ni caliente eres.

¡Ojalá fueras frío o caliente!

Rev. 3:16 ουτως, οτι χλιαροσ ει και ουτε ζεστος ουτε ψυχροσ, μελλω σε εμεσαι εκ του στοματος μου.

So, since you are tepid and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of my mouth.

Así, como eres tibio y ni caliente ni frío, estoy por vomitarte de mi boca.

Rev. 3:17 οτι λεγεις οτι Πλουσιος ειμι και πεπλουτηκα και ουδεν χρειαν εχω, και ουκ οιδασ οτι συ ει ο ταλαιπωροσ και ελεεινοσ και πτωχοσ και τυφλοσ και γυμνοσ.

Because you say, “I am rich and have become wealthy and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are the wretched and pitiful one, and poor and blind and naked.

Porque dices: “Soy rico, y me he enriquecido, y nada me hace falta”; y no sabes que tú eres el desgraciado y miserable, y pobre, y ciego, y desnudo.

Rev. 3:18 συμβουλευω σοι αγορασαι παρ εμου

χρυσιον πεπυρωμενον εκ πυροσ ινα πλουτησης,

και ματια λευκα ινα περιβαλη και μη φανερωθη η αισχυνη της γυμνοτητος σου,

και κολλυριον εγχρισαι τους οφθαλμους σου ινα βλεπης.

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you can become rich,

and white garments so that you can be clothed and the shame of your nakedness will not appear,

and eye salve to apply as an ointment to your eyes so that you can see.

Te aconsejo que compres de mí oro refinado en el fuego para que seas rico, y ropa blanca para que te vistas y no se vea la vergüenza de tu desnudez, y colirio para aplicar como unguento a tus ojos para que veas.

Rev. 3:19 εγω οσους εαν φιλω ελεγχω και παιδευω  
ζηλευε ουν και μετανοησον.

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline;  
be fervent, therefore, and repent.

A todos los que amo, yo reprendo y disciplino; sé ferviente, pues, y arrepíentete.

Rev. 3:20 Ιδου εστηκα επι την θυραν και κρουω  
εαν τις ακουση της φωνης μου και ανοιξη την θυραν,  
εισελευσομαι προσ αυτον και δειπνησω μετ αυτου και αυτοσ μετ εμου.

Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking;  
if anyone hears my voice and opens the door,

I will come in to him and dine with him and he with me.

He aquí, estoy a la puerta, y estoy tocando; si alguien oye mi voz y abre la puerta, entraré a él y cenaré con él, y él conmigo.

Rev. 3:21

ο νικων δωσω αυτω καθισαι μετ εμου εν τω θρονω μου,  
ωσ καγω ενικησα και εκαθισα μετα του πατροσ μου εν τω θρονω αυτου.

To the conqueror, I will grant to sit with me on my throne,  
as I, too, have conquered and have sat down with my father on his  
throne.

Al vencedor concederé que se siente conmigo en mi trono, como yo también he vencido y me he sentado con mi padre en su trono.

Rev. 3:22 ο εχων ουσ ακουσατω τι το πνευμα λεγει ταισ εκκλησiais.

Let the one who has an ear hear what the spirit is saying to the  
churches.

El que tiene oído oiga lo que el espíritu dice a las iglesias.

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